

Luke 5: 17-26
Take a Chance
Sunday August 6, 2023
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Twenty years ago, there was a popular situation comedy called Friends. It focused on the lives of six young adults – 3 men and 3 women living in apartments across the hall from each other in New York City. Every episode found humor in their struggles to find jobs and find romance as they negotiated all the challenges of the Big Apple. While Friends did not rely on great drama or enjoy the best reviews, it ran for 10 seasons from 1994 – 2004 because it made an emotional connection with the viewers. Friends had a cult-like following with millions of people, becoming the most-watched tv program of all time. What was the secret? Friends reminded us that no matter what we face in life, we need one another. We need companions in life.

You all need friends at every stage of life. Photos of preschoolers with their arms around each other go viral on social media. Friendships that change a life the staple of many novels. If your is having trouble finding friends at school, you wonder how to help. If a neighborhood isn't friendly, you consider moving. In the summer your friends at the lake are an important piece of why you like it. When it is time to retire you want to be sure you live somewhere where you'll be able to cultivate good friendships.

Our story today in Luke is a testament to the power of friendship. It's about a a man who was paralyzed and unable to work in the fields, to earn any wages or find food. Reduced to poverty, he sits on a mat by the city gates hoping for a handout, relying on the mercy of others. But he is wealthy in something you cannot under-estimate. He has some amazing friends. They

hear that Jesus can restore you and make you whole so they all decide to take the paralytic for a healing. It's a remarkable story about an unlikely miracle, a healing that made possible by good friends. Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, there are times in life when we all need people to carry us sometimes. We don't know how this man begging for his living, found good friends. We don't know if they were school chums, work buddies or neighbors. All we know is that they believed in this man and in the promise of a better future. We know that they were spunky, determined and united in their mission to deliver this man to Jesus. In that moment he needed people to carry him.

Not long ago there was a story on NPR about a woman who lived in the UP. Her friend from New York came to visit and they were driving when a stranger passed them in another car. The native of the UP waved and her friend from New York asked, "Do you know that man" She replied, No, "but up here it pays to make friends with all your neighbors. You never know when you will be stuck in a ditch." There are times in life when we need to depend on each other.

When you go to your child's teacher conference they review academics, but also social skills, because teachers recognize that learning to have friends is a skill that enriches us all life-long. For decades now Harvard University has been doing a study into what makes people healthy and happy. The director of the study sums up the research saying, "The surprising finding is that how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health." He says, People's satisfaction in their relationships at 50 is a better predictor of physical health than their cholesterol level for example. "Taking care of your body is important, but tending to your relationships is also a form of self-care. And the absence of friendships is as powerful as

smoking and alcoholism in its detrimental effect on your health. {Dr. Robert Waldinger, Harvard University Study of Adults Development}

One of the wonderful gifts of living in Appleton this year has been the many friendship Peggy and I have cultivated with so many of you. We feel blessed by your kindness and generous ways. There were plenty of moments when needed help or advise us. We are grateful because you helped to make this experience what it has been. Our friendships will be one of the true treasures of this experience. When you are new or feeling nervous or know you need help – that’s when you forge tight bonds. Those are the friends you never forget, the ones who come along in life and offer to pick you up a bit and even carry you, the friends who see you as you are but who recognize your hopes for a better life, the friends who believe in you and the possibility you could be healed, and whole. A good friend will carry you when you are down, or hurt, or paralyzed. Sometimes the biggest hurdle is allowing them to help you. We all need good strong friends.

Secondly, there are times in life when you need to be persistent. The Bible never gives us enough dialogue. SO, in this story I try to imagine the conversation among these people as they make their way to Jesus. “ They say this guy is really good. This is the break we’ve been hoping for. If he fixes your legs, you can go back home. You can pick up your kids again, and work in the fields, and things will be back to normal.” Then when they arrive at the house where Jesus is and see how many people got there first it amazing how they re-group and come up with a bolder plan. Not once do they say... “Tough luck buddy.” Instead, they look at one another and nod, “We’ve come this far, we’re not going home without a healing. Let’s try the roof.”

Why go to such lengths? Because there are times in life when you need to persist. Now they were committed, to each other, to the man in need to themselves. They couldn't give up. They needed to press on. In the 1930's James Cameron was 18 living in Indiana when an angry mob of white people took and his two friends out to be lynched. The crowd killed his two friends and were about to kill him for a crime he didn't commit but when a judge intervened and stopped the violence Cameron went to prison but he survived. It would be decades before he cleared his name, but he spent the rest of his life working for civil rights. The founder of 3 chapters of the NAACP he was appointed Director of Civil Liberties in Indiana. But the Ku Klux Klan threatened him and his family repeatedly, so Coleman moved to Milwaukee. He did not give up the cause, and spoke about civil rights in the 60's and 70's at schools and colleges. He sent letters to the Milwaukee papers, wrote a book about his life, and founded the Black Holocaust Museum in Milwaukee. It wasn't until 2005 when he was 91 that he went to Washington because 80 US senators voted to apologize to everyone who'd been lynched and their descendants for failing to make lynching a federal crime. Speaking from a wheelchair he told the senators he hoped to keep educating people about civil rights as he had since 1935. The best things in life don't come easily. You have to fight for them.

Whatever obstacles you face, you need to persevere. You need to make a way out of no way. You need to do everything in your power to press on. Perseverance becomes its own reward.

Finally, Jesus says in this story that God is on your side. The most striking moment in this story is Jesus' reaction when this crew breaks through the roof and lowers the paralyzed man on a pallet down in front of Christ. With roof tiles braking above him and dust falling all over the

room on Jesus and the other invalids, He looks up, with a smile. He's smiling. He is not angry. Almost amused at the intrusion, he remarks "Look what we've got here. This guy's got a lot of faith." Jesus isn't upset. in fact, He rewards their chutzpa.

A lot of people will tell you that God is very angry most of the time. A lot of people think God is easily upset. We walk on a razor's edge because God has such a short fuse. Their God is more like those nuns you hear about who circle the classroom with a ruler at the ready, waiting to point out your next mistakes. That's not the God of the Bible, not really. God's more often like Jesus here in Luke's gospel. If anyone should have earned Jesus' reprimand, it would be this paralytic and his friends. They've damaged the private property of the family hosting Jesus. They cut the line barging in front of all the people who camped out over night. For that alone, they might have started a riot. Plus, they leave a mess of plaster in the room below, on all the people in Jesus' hair.

The Bible says, apparently, you don't need to be perfect to get Jesus' attention. You don't need to follow all the rules to have your prayers answered. You don't need to be afraid that coloring outside the lines in life will be a fatal error. Ironically, when the man dangles over him, Jesus himself "breaks the rules". He forgives the paralytic's sins instead of healing his legs. The scribes and Pharisees get all upset. But none of it matters.

Fred Rogers creator of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, a man with his own healing ministry, made it his mission to teach children and all of us that God loves us and values us just the way we are. He bathed with a Black man in a wading pool, a radical act of racial justice. But for his efforts Mr. Rogers became the target of scathing criticism and hate mail. He corresponded with Fr. Henri Nouwen, who persisted in his own ministry writing movingly about God's love for us.

Both men were criticized modern Pharisees for their unorthodox and radical ideas. At a low point, Nouwen wrote a letter: Dear Fred, "I feel a unique solidarity with you. I get a lot of criticism too. Let us pray for each other that we remain faithful and not become bitter." When Jesus looked up that day there was only love in his eyes. His love healed everyone – body and soul. It's the reminder that God loves us more than we know, that will heal us all in the end, whatever happens to our bodies.

Jesus came into this world to demonstrate that underneath all of life, is this safety net of love holding us, whatever disappointment we face, whatever mess we've made, or whatever trouble we face. Because God loves us so, we can face the future, without fear. No matter what Jesus is there smiling with benevolent affection. Look at you – all you've been through to get here. "Welcome home. Let's fix you up."