



January 12, 2020

Sermon Series: Following Jesus to Surprising Places

Jesus Pushes Boundaries
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Mark 2:1-22 NRSV

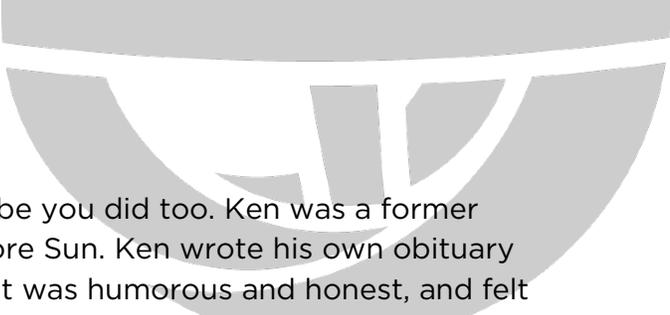
When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷"Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" ⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk?' ¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—¹¹"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." ¹²And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

¹³Jesus went out again beside the lake; the whole crowd gathered around him, and he taught them. ¹⁴As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁵And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax-collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?" ¹⁷When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

¹⁸Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹Jesus said to them, "The wedding-guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

²¹"No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²²And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."



I came across the story of Ken Fuson this week. Maybe you did too. Ken was a former reporter for the Des Moines Register and the Baltimore Sun. Ken wrote his own obituary a couple weeks ago, before he died of liver disease. It was humorous and honest, and felt more like a conversation with an old friend than a trip through one's personal and professional resume. He began, Ken Fuson, born June 23, 1956, died Jan. 3, 2020 at Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, of liver cirrhosis, and is stunned to learn that the world is somehow able to go on without him."

What struck me most was that Ken didn't just highlight the awards he won as a journalist (though he did do that). He talked about the surprising and sometimes foolish turns he took in life. He was breathtakingly honest when he wrote, "For most of his life, Ken suffered from a compulsive gambling addiction that nearly destroyed him. [He lost his wife, his home, and nearly his career.] But his church friends, and the loving people at Gamblers Anonymous, never gave up on him. Ken last placed a bet on Sept. 5, 2009. He died clean. He hopes that anyone who needs help will seek it, which is hard, and accept it, which is even harder. Miracles abound."

There are any number of reasons we're not good at asking for help, and worse, at accepting it. Some live and die by the idea that they need to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. But let's be honest, how many of us are really carrying around bootstraps in the first place? Others are too proud to admit when they've strayed out of bounds. In high school, I once led all of my friends through poison ivy on the way to a bonfire and insisted all along I knew exactly where I was going. Yet, still others may not believe they are good enough to accept the help of others, often because they've been told so in implicit and explicit ways throughout their lives. All of these things in one way or another keep us from what God seeks to do in our lives, to heal and make whole.

It isn't a new phenomenon though. There was a man who lay outside the crowds near Jesus' house. He had long given up on asking for help. What could people do for him? He was paralyzed, beyond help or hope, or so he thought. That day, people had come from all over because they had heard what Jesus had been doing: touching people others wouldn't touch, and making people well in body, mind, and spirit. If they weren't there for healing themselves, they sure hoped to see others healed. But that paralyzed man, on his tattered, worn out, old mat wasn't part of it - until he was.

Apparently, not everyone had given up on him, not everyone around him had lost hope. They knew he couldn't pull himself up by his bootstraps, and they believed against his judgment that he was worthy of help. They picked him up and when they could not get through the crowds, they took the time and effort to break through the roof to get him to the one who had been healing others.





As his friends lowered him down in front of Jesus, I imagine a hush came over the bustling house as the people stepped back and squished a little closer to make room for the one who believed there was no room for him. When Jesus looked at the effort of his friends and looked at the condition of this man, this bystander who was now center stage, Jesus simply said, “Son, my child, your sins are forgiven.”

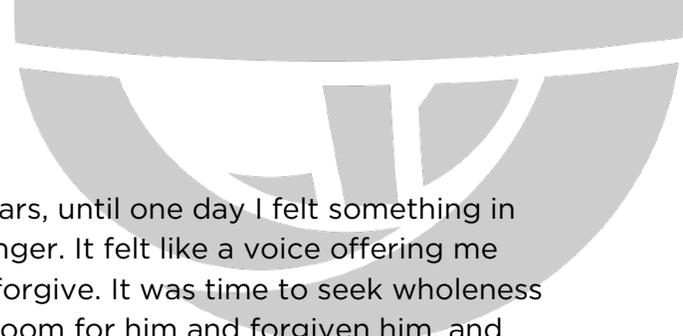
To our ears, it may sound strange that Jesus would forgive someone who clearly needed medical attention – not spiritual cleansing. But it is not out of the ordinary. Of course, Jesus forgives sins. But for those in that room it was revolutionary. Some gasped with amazement as if it was too good to be true, and others cried foul. “Who is he to forgive sins? Who is he to not only speak of God, but to speak AS God!?”

It turns out forgiveness is a scandalous thing. It has a way of upsetting the status quo and transforming relationships. When Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven”, he was not making a judgment about the man’s physical ability, but about his relationship to the community. He was restoring him to wholeness by saying, “You DO belong here. There is room for you. You do matter.” Jesus’ forgiveness pushed the boundaries of relationships. It stretched the good order of a highly regimented society by making room for grace and mercy. No longer were relationships based on what one brought to the table, as if it were simply a transaction. Jesus’ forgiveness removed the barriers that kept the man out of relationship with God and with others too.

Today, forgiveness can still be scandalous. It still has the power to push boundaries, to stretch relationships. Forgiveness makes it possible for a damaged relationship to evolve and continue in a new direction. But forgiveness is so much more. For Jesus and for Christians, forgiveness is the gateway to wholeness and healing. It’s the reason that Jesus came – to heal broken systems of isolation and to break down systems that keep people out, to restore relationships between communities and peoples, and to reunite the created with the Creator. The room that Jesus made for Ken Fuson after years of gambling addiction made all the difference for him. He wrote, “Skepticism may be cool, and for too many years Ken embraced it, but it was faith in Jesus Christ that transformed his life. That was the one thing he never regretted. It changed everything.”

I have mentioned in the past that I grew up with an alcoholic stepdad. He was the only father figure I had as a child, and when I was 15 his addiction spiraled out of control. One night he and buddy got loaded, packed shotguns in my dad’s car and robbed a liquor store downtown. He ended up spending the next two years in prison. I’ll be honest, on the one hand I was relieved. Living in the storm of addiction took its toll, and I was glad to be rid of the daily unpredictability. But naturally, I was also hurt and angry. I felt isolated, broken, and in my fifteen-year-old mind somewhat responsible.





That anger I felt held on like a vice grip for many years, until one day I felt something in me. It felt like cracks of mercy trying to break the anger. It felt like a voice offering me forgiveness and calling me to let go. It was time to forgive. It was time to seek wholeness and healing and admit that God had already made room for him and forgiven him, and now I could too. That was true relief.

When we do the hard work of accepting not only God's help, but God's forgiveness it can feel like new life. In experiencing God's forgiveness, you can also come to trust that "You do belong here. There is room for you. You do matter" also.

Let me make something clear about forgiveness though, especially when it comes to our relationships with one another. Forgiveness is not being wronged and telling the person, "Oh, it's ok, no big deal." Especially if it what happened really was a big deal. This is one of the more pernicious forms of "Minnesota Nice". It suggests that it would be too much of a hassle to really address something that wasn't right. No, true forgiveness looks at what has separated you from one you care about, recognize it, name it, and in full light of the thing that has caused harm, you offer forgiveness and seek a new path forward together.

I'm not sure we're really taught how to do this very well. We live in a commodified world where relationships are almost encouraged to be transactional, disposable even. But that is not the life Jesus envisions for us and it's not the life Jesus came to give to us.

It's no wonder that Jesus' next step after leaving the crowded house was to call Levi. He was another outsider, a tax-collector - a representative of the Emperor - whom Jesus made room for amongst another crowd by the lake. Levi literally made his living through transactional relationships. He went to the people and told them how much they owed Rome for their safety and security, and he took his cut from the top to make a living. Nothing wrong with that, so long as he's honest. Yet, that was often the problem, tax collectors were rarely honest. Jesus knew this. He knew what the people thought, how they resented him. It was probably guys like Levi who kept many of Jesus' friends poor and powerless. Yet, he called him anyway. He believed that there was another life for him.

How we make a life and how we make a living are very different things. "Come, follow me" sounds like a call to wholeness that God offers. Wholeness of self, wholeness with others, wholeness with God. It sounds like a call to reorient and reevaluate how we live together and how we live in God's abundant grace and mercy. Jesus may have to push the boundaries for us to see our spot in the crowd, he may have to stretch the limits of our relationships for us to make room for others. But this is what Jesus does, again and again Jesus expands the reach of God's wholeness so that all may experience the transforming power of God's love. Amen.

