

**Elder Carolyn Bolbach, Moderator of PC(USA) General Assembly,
Guest Speaker
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
March 20, 2011, Second Sunday in Lent
“Breaking Through?”
Mark 2:1-5, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=169137405>**

In my office at BNA [BNA, Inc., Bolbach’s “day job”], where I work when I’m not off on church business, I have a small poster, actually more post-card sized, nicely framed. When you first look at the poster, you think it’s one of those inspirational photos – you see this grouping of hands all clasped together, like a basketball team just before they’re about to break the huddle. And of course the hands are in all different colors – black, brown, white. So your first thought is, “isn’t this nice – an inspirational moment celebrating people coming together in all their rich diversity.” The poster has two-line caption. The first line, in large, bold letters, says simply, “Meetings”. Under that is a second line, in much smaller letters. That line reads, “None of us is as dumb as all of us.” It’s a line that could be used to describe many church meetings – although, I hasten to add, surely not here at East Liberty. The possibility that gathering people together in groups might lead to difficult behavior is, astonishingly enough, not a product of 20th or 21st century Presbyterians. Paul himself had to deal with the reality that, sometimes, “none of us is as dumb as all of us.”

Look at Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. Paul founded that church; he put 18 months into establishing a Christian community there. Imagine the emotional investment that he has in making sure that the community continues to thrive and to grow. And so, when we read parts of his letter to the church there, his frustration – his pain, fairly leap off the pages at us. “It has been brought to my attention,” he writes, “that there are quarrels among you.” Not only are there quarrels, but Paul goes on to tell them that “your meetings tend to do more harm than good.” It’s almost as if Paul himself wrote that caption – “none of us is as dumb as all of us.” Except ... that Paul knows, better than any of us, that no one – not the folks living in Corinth in the first century, or Presbyterians living in the 21st century – none of us can follow Jesus in isolation.

It’s enticing, sometimes, to fantasize about being Christian on your own. I’m sure that you, like me, have heard someone say, “oh yes, I’m Christian, I’m VERY spiritual, I worship in my garden on Sunday, or when I’m walking on the beach.” I’m not saying that someone can’t have a spiritual experience while in the garden. What I am saying, though, is that none of us can be Christians alone. As much as we’d like to avoid the squabbling, the disagreements that come about in meetings or whenever people gather together, we can’t. We need to come together if we want to be Christians.

And as proof I offer the Gospel lesson. A paralyzed man wants to see Jesus, wants to hear him preach. But because of the large crowd that had gathered at the house where Jesus was, the paralyzed man can’t get through the crowd. Left to his own devices, he would not, could not, see Jesus. But he is not left to own devices; others are there to

help him. They lift him up onto the roof of the house, cut a hole in the roof, and then lower him down. By their action, the paralyzed man sees Jesus. The paralyzed man could not have seen Jesus on his own. And, let's be honest, neither can we.

Every one of us is paralyzed in some way. Maybe we're paralyzed by fear that faith in Jesus Christ will cause us to be ridiculed or not taken seriously in a post-modern age. Maybe we're paralyzed by the sobering reality of what humans have done to other humans ostensibly in the name of following Jesus. Maybe we're paralyzed by the untimely death of someone we loved, wondering how a God of love could allow something like that to happen.

And just as individuals can become paralyzed, so too can a denomination. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is perilously close to paralysis, paralysis caused by many factors, including:

- Our weariness over fighting continuing battles about who can serve as ordained leaders in our church;
- Our uncertainty and fear over what the future of a denomination is in a time that has been called not just post-denominational but post-Christian;
- Our grief over the possible loss of the kind of church that many of us have known and loved for all of our lives – a grief that is no less real even though we know that the church must change if it is to survive;
- And our anxiety over what, exactly, that change should be.

How can we, as individuals or as a denomination, overcome our paralysis? The Gospel tells us: we have to rely on others to help us. We have to rely on those who we know and on those who we don't know. We have to rely on those with whom we agree, and on those with whom we don't agree. We have to rely on anyone who is committed to following Jesus and who can think creatively, like those in the Gospel story, to help us see Jesus.

This is not an easy course to take. It would be far easier just to stay in that crowd that was gathered around Jesus – the crowd that, for whatever reason, didn't clear a path for the paralyzed man. Staying in the crowd doesn't require commitment, it doesn't pose the possibility of rejection, it avoids conflict. Staying in the crowd allows us to lead an orderly and managed life. Staying in the crowd allows us to avoid the necessary messiness that happened when you break through roofs.

Breaking holes in roofs is messy. It's not something done decently and in order. We don't know how long it took to punch that hole in the roof. We don't know if they had to deal with an angry homeowner. We don't know what sort of muck fell down on the heads of those, like Jesus, already in the house. What we do know is this: those folks who helped the paralyzed man didn't stay in the crowd. They took on the messy task of breaking through the roof; they kept at that task through whatever difficulties; and they succeeded. The paralyzed man saw Jesus. And so did they.

Twenty centuries later, they challenge us: Can we step out of the crowd? Can we allow ourselves to rely on those we don't agree with, on those who are different from us? Can we start breaking some holes in some roofs? Can we help each other see Jesus?

If we can't, if we as a church don't come together as faith-filled friends and start breaking some holes in some roofs, if we don't start thinking creatively and imaginatively about how to do ministry in the 21st century, then that caption on my poster – none of us is as dumb as all of us – will come true.

At the first General Assembly I attended, in 1997, I heard Frederick Buechner, the noted Presbyterian pastor and author, say that he wasn't going to church much anymore because he "couldn't find God there." I don't know if he still feels this way. But we don't come to church to find God. We come to church, we come to our community of faith, whether it be our local congregation, our Presbytery, our Synod, or the General Assembly, to help each other overcome our paralysis, to help each other see Jesus. We come so that, together, when we see Jesus, we can confess, with Peter, that he is the "Christ, the son of the living God." When we make that confession, we set out on a journey, together. A journey to break as many holes in as many roofs as possible in order to allow other people to see Jesus. We don't know exactly how long, how contentious, how messy, or how difficult that journey will be. What we do know, though, is that eventually our journey will lead us to the foot of a cross. And then to an empty tomb. And it is there that God finds us. God finds us, in all our diversity, in all our disagreements, in all of our messiness, but also in our togetherness as friends seeking Jesus. God finds you. God finds me. God finds the church. Thanks be to God.

AMEN