

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
September 4, 2011
“Radical Hospitality: Welcoming Words”
Matthew 9:1-8

Good morning class. As next Sunday is Rally Day, the first day of church school for all ages, I want to prepare you for next week by having you imagine that you are back in the classroom. And, like any good teacher, I'm going to start the first class session with a quiz. (Wait a minute: everyone hates it when teachers do that! Oh, well.) Imagine that you are being given a vocabulary quiz; you are asked to define a list of terms. You've just heard a passage from Matthew's gospel and now I want you to define three terms as they relate to the scripture reading. The words are: hospitality, healing, and sins. Now before you mentally compose your answers to this quiz, let me offer a few pointers. People today do not connect with bible stories for two reasons: we don't read the bible often enough, so we never take the time to learn its distinctive vocabulary or grapple with its message, and secondly, when we do encounter the bible, we mostly give it a "flat" reading. By that I mean we read it in ways that are too literal and superficial. When you pick up a Robert Frost poem and read "two roads diverged in a wood," you would never assume that Frost was simply talking about GPS directions and the best route for going home. Or when you read Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, you know that the madwoman up in the attic is just the tip of the iceberg for all the secrecy and trouble associated with Mr. Rochester and Thornfield Manor. Yet when people are handed a bible story, too often they read it in a flat, literal manner: Jesus met a man who had some form of paralysis. Jesus being the Son of God performs a miracle and the man gets up and walks. End of story. If that version of the story is the basis for a vocabulary quiz, then I imagine the following test papers being submitted:

Vocabulary Quiz based on Matthew 9. Hospitality is being kind and compassionate to someone in need. Healing is the curing of a bodily ailment, like removing paralysis. Sins are things we do that disappoint God or break God's laws, and which Jesus has the power to forgive. End of quiz.

Over the past months, our church and its officers have been putting together a Strategic Vision, crafting language to shape and guide us as we seek to follow what God would have us do here at ELPC. During the month of September, in my sermons I will be exploring one phrase from our Mission Statement, the phrase "radical hospitality." It is part of a sentence that goes like this: *As a diverse community of believers, we show God's unconditional love by providing a refuge for spiritual growth, ardently pursuing justice, and extending Christ's radical hospitality to all.* At first it may seem unusual to pair the word "hospitality" with the adjective "radical." But remember that we use two adjectives in our mission statement: we speak of "Christ's radical hospitality." William Sloane Coffin has said this: "Let the Church in remembering Christ remember that it is conserving the most uprooting, the most revolutionary force in all human history. For it was Christ who crossed every boundary [and] broke down every barrier."¹ In light of this, let's give the quiz another try.

¹ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (2004), p. 138; quoted in *Feasting on the Word, Mark 2:1-12*, p. 380.

Hospitality is associated with being a gracious host. Providing a nice meal, hors d'oeuvres, refreshments, and lively conversation is being hospitable. But being hospitable also means you welcome someone into your house: you invite them to cross your threshold, to step into your place of authority and power, and sit beside you as an equal. To be inhospitable is to bar someone from crossing your threshold, seeing them as a second class citizen. By standards both physical and social, the paralyzed man was barred from normal gatherings. He was considered an outcast, supposedly accursed by God as evidenced in his condition. Yet his friends brought him into the inner circle around Jesus. In Mark and Luke's version of this event, we're told that this man was literally lowered through a hole in the roof in order to be set before Jesus. Hospitality achieved by force – ripping up ceiling tiles and roofing materials to open a breach in the protective social wall that had been built to keep the paralytic out – but it only became real hospitality when Christ radically accepted the hole in the roof, the breach in the social order, and welcomed the paralyzed man as a child of God.

This happened time after time in Jesus' ministry: the woman cast to the edge of the crowd because of a flow of blood, the leper pushed to the edge of the road, or the woman-turned-prostitute to survive in a male-dominated world who huddled at the edge of the room where Jesus was eating. In each case, Christ welcomed them across the threshold. He showed a radical hospitality to them that challenged the way those around him had been content to define "hospitality" on their personal bible quizzes.

What about the second word: healing? What's interesting is that the passage we read from Matthew 9 never uses the verb "to heal." Jesus never says to the paralyzed man "Be healed;" Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven" and "Stand up and walk." We tend to superficially think of this as a healing story, but it is about something else, something deeper. Just because you take medicine to fix a problem or have surgery to cure an ailment doesn't mean that you are healed. If your injury is the result of a violent act, a tragedy like a car accident, or a lifetime of depression or being abused, medicine can perhaps cure you, but it doesn't always heal you. When Jesus showed hospitality to the paralyzed man, in effect welcoming him across the threshold back into normal society, he was modeling a hospitality that was radical and deep and an affront to the patterns of life usually lived out. In the same way, the healing miracle he performed with the paralyzed man (not "performed on," but rather, "with" the paralytic) was just as deep and radical and life-changing for all concerned.

A superficial reading of the text suggests that the paralytic was simply a man who, for example, had a spinal cord injury and couldn't walk until Jesus miraculously restored that physical capacity to him. But if that is all this story is about, it doesn't have much to say to those of us without spinal cord injuries. There are lots of ways to be paralyzed: paralyzed by guilt, by regret, fear, indecision; paralyzed by unjust laws, racism and oppression and prejudice. We can feel like our life is stuck, as if someone hit the "pause" button on our life and we're not able to go forward or backward. The paralysis in these cases is not something physiological, something within our nerves or spinal system. It is something larger: involving us and those around us and society at large.

And somewhere in this equation, sin is also a factor. Our short definition for sin was that it is something we've done wrong and which is an offense to God. Yes, there are sins that fit that description. But sin is not just a legal matter, a wrong answer on God's quiz, an infraction against God's holy law. Sin is something larger than just personal transgressions. In the cities where Jesus walked and taught, the poor were poor because they didn't own much land if any, they were heavily taxed, and the power to change things resided in the palaces of foreign governments or the temples and chambers of faith leaders. The religious leaders had a stake in the economic games of the land, just as the political leaders had a stake in the religious affairs of the land. Was the poor man brought to Jesus paralyzed from a physical condition; was he paralyzed and treated as a sinner because he wasn't producing enough profit for others from his labor on borrowed land?² As this weekend contains the Labor Day holiday, it is appropriate for us as a church to ask questions about how faith is either complicit with or far too silent in its relation with business and labor, and whether Jesus is calling us to redeem people paralyzed under unfair economic practices that render them unable to function. Some may argue, "No, Preacher, you go too far. The text doesn't say all that. I prefer a superficial reading that treats the man solely as a physical paralytic. That's much simpler and cleaner."

So let's come at this from another angle. I've noted with concern that when my 10-year old daughter looks at the Special K cereal box as she eats her breakfast, it is emblazoned with the picture of a very thin, vivacious-looking, bikini clad, young woman, happy (I assume) because she, too, eats Special K. I can tell my daughter "that woman is too thin," but my words ring hollow against the power of the visual message she's already received – and not just from the cereal box, but from the billboards and TV commercials and magazine ads that flood her world every day. All around us young women and men are binging and cutting and purging; captive to self-destructive cycles of anorexia and bulimia. Is a young woman with an eating disorder a sinner, an individual choosing to abuse her God-given body, paralyzed in a trap of her own making? Or is she a reflection of a society that celebrates and promotes a distorted female image, spending billions of dollars each year trying to get us to achieve it?³ How do you answer that question? It is complex. It is not superficial and able to fit on a few lines on a quiz sheet.

That is why we look again at the radical hospitality of Jesus. To the paralytic, to the AIDS victim, the anorexia sufferer, the cancer patient, the sharecropper or illegal immigrant, he first says, "Take heart, my child; your sins are forgiven." He is not being legalistic nor is he assigning blame to them. He is saying, in effect, "Whatever voice you hear in your head that is telling you that you are unworthy, paralyzed, and powerless, I offer you a different message. You are forgiven. The other voices have no lasting power or authority. None." No true healing – not curing or fixing – no *healing* can occur until a different voice is spoken to those deafened by the belief that there is no escape from their life or their self-definition of sin.

² Jerry Irish, *Feasting on the Word (Mark 2:1-12)* Theological Perspective, p. 382.

³ Ibid.

Then Jesus tackles the big problem with a simple question: “Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven?’ or ‘Stand up, take your bed, and go home?’” Both are equally easy to say. Both are thus equal options. But suddenly the tidy, oppressive boundaries of life have been shattered by Christ’s radical hospitality. The ability to forgive sins has moved from the heights of heaven, or, the inner sanctum of the temple, into the very houses and streets of the community. The call to stand up and walk is given to everyone paralyzed by fear or by unjust economic policies or dehumanizing laws written by and for those in power to preserve their places of power. As soon as Jesus said and did these things, the crowd was filled with awe and glorified God, as it was surely right to do.

So having encountered this story from Matthew 9, hopefully, on a deeper level, what are we to do with this new perspective? First, go back and write different answers on your vocabulary quiz. Sin is defined as a brokenness that turns us away from loving God and others, a voice that tells us we are unworthy and paralyzed in a world of opportunity and goodness. Healing is when we find cures both physical and spiritual to silence the demonic voices of hatred, violence, and fear spoken within and around us. This healing and forgiveness of sin comes to us through Jesus the Christ, whose radical hospitality breaks down the walls that imprison us; the shackles that bind us and paralyze us in our lives.

What else are we to do? We are to extend Christ’s radical hospitality to all. It means breaking down barriers at our communion table, our family table, our city and national places of food and feasting. It means we are to carry others who no longer can walk or move or hope for themselves. It means we are to bring them to Jesus, the one who says “your sins are forgiven” and “stand up and walk,” knowing that body and soul are truly interconnected. It means that we too are to be filled with awe, glorifying God in the highest who has given such authority to human beings, children of God, just like us. For such is surely right to do.

AMEN