

Sunday, January 29, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "Extending the hand of Christian Love"

Imagine for a moment, if you will, what it might be like to be paralyzed.

Concentrate on your legs. Sit perfectly still and

Imagine not having the ability to move.

Now think about your arms.

Feel their weight and then imagine not feeling them at all.

Now, picture yourself on a mat, being carried by four of your friends through a crowded street.

Your friend's strength and enthusiasm is moving you along.

You are completely dependent on them for your safety.

They are intent on getting you in to see this Jesus everyone is talking about.

They have heard about miracles.

They have faith that you might be healed.

The crowd is too dense.

They cannot go through.

They decide to go to the roof.

The roof.

You are on a mat, paralyzed.

All you can do at this point is trust your friends.

Slowly, you are eased up to the roof and then down, through a hole to the feet of the Savior.

You look up from your mat and you are in the presence of God.

He looks into your eyes and says, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

You are not sure what to do. You say nothing.

There is a stir in the crowd.

The elders, the Pharisees are criticizing these words.

Then Jesus says, "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

And you stand, you take your mat and walk, you walk, through the crowd.

The crowd is amazed.

They sing praise to God.

And you, how do you feel?

You have not uttered a single word.

How has your life changed?

So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins....

So that you may know that it is through the faith of friends, through the efforts of community, through the care and love of one another that we move into the presence of Christ.

Each one of us, at some point in our life will need the help of someone else, just as surely as each one of us, at some point in our life will have an opportunity to help someone else.

We are created to be interdependent.

We are made for community.

When we gather here each week we are developing that sense of belonging to one another and to God.

We gather as God's family, thereby creating ties that will bind us to each other.

When I listen to Mark's words describing the scene in Capernaum, I am reminded of my friend Rick.

In the summer of 2005 Rick, a successful businessman and trained physical therapist, was building a tree house for his son. He fell out of the tree and was paralyzed.

For months, even years –to this day – the community rallied to support Rick and his family as they learned to cope with this tragedy.

I particularly remember a day when Rick's son Ben was singing in a recital that was being held in a building that was not handicapped accessible.

It was important for Rick to be at Ben's concert, so a group of men, four friends, waited at the base of the stairs and carried Rick, in his wheelchair, into the hall.

I remember watching Rick's face.

He was scared.

He was totally dependent on those four friends for his safety and well-being.

He had to have complete trust.

I also remember the faces of those friends.

They knew the magnitude of their task.

They lifted Rick with care and ever so gently moved him up those stairs.

There was a sense of joy.

That was the first of many times that Rick would depend on people to help him.

Today, seven years later, he is willing to fly on airplanes, stay in hotels, put himself in places where he must depend on strangers to help him.

The seeds of that confidence were sown that Spring day, years ago, when his four friends gently expanded his possibilities.

The second story that comes to mind when I listen to the gospel is my own.

Almost twelve years ago, I had to undergo surgery to remove a brain tumor.

The doctor told me that I would be in the hospital about a week, but that it would take me about a year to fully recover.

A year. Didn't he realize that I had two young sons to raise, a business to run, a husband and home to care for? Did he really expect that I could stop for a year?

Well, it wasn't exactly optional.

God comes to us in the most surprising ways.

For me, it was a period of complete surrender.

I had to depend on the doctors to perform the surgery.

I had to depend on my family and friends to take care of me, to attend to my every need.

I had to depend on the prayers of other people, because my own prayers didn't seem like enough.

I was the man on that mat being carried through the crowd.

I was humbled.

I learned to be dependent.

I was transformed.

One of the hardest transitions for me was to be a receiver.

Many of us are comfortable dispensing compassion and care, but receiving it seems awkward. Culturally, we are conditioned to be self-sufficient, independent, in charge.

When we have to surrender, even a part of that, we feel compromised.

As a result we tend to resist being recipients of other people's gifts.

This is something that we need to work on.

We need each other.

Sometimes we are the man on the mat, sometimes we are called to be the carriers.

It is equally important that we be able to be both.

Either way, we are called to community.

Henri Nouwen calls Community, "a Quality of the Heart which grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another."

Paul's letter to the Phillipians reminds us that community is the fruit of our capacity to make the interests of others more important than our own.

He says: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Jesus taught us how to care for others, how to reach out and heal, how to listen, how to care.

We are here, gathered together to become alive to Christ.

We covenant with one another to walk in God's holy ways.

Sometimes we are the man on the mat and sometimes we are called into service.

Let's do both with our whole heart, trusting that it is God's work that we are doing.