

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Mark 2:1-12

Title: “Emerge: Fly—Daring New Heights

Kathy Gilson posted on Facebook last week that she saw a hummingbird moth eating nectar from her flowers, and it reminded me that last summer I was sitting with a friend on his patio near the Boardman River in Traverse City drinking coffee. His patio is surrounded by a beautiful flower garden with purple lavender, day lilies, butterfly bushes and other assorted perennial blossoming plants. As we sat there watching the river go by and drinking our coffee, what I thought was a hummingbird began hovering at one of the butterfly bushes. I watched it hover--like a mini helicopter--at one blossom then move and hover at another. It was so dainty and precise in the way in which it flew. Mike told me it was a hummingbird moth, something I'd never seen before. It's also an insect that emerges from a cocoon.

When it's time to transform, the Clearwing Hummingbird Moth caterpillar drops into the leaf debris on the ground and produces a cocoon. It spends the winter months in that cocoon in the leaf debris only to emerge in the spring as one of these...(project photo of the moth). So from what appears to be a lifeless casing in the debris on the forest floor emerges this beautiful, joy to watch, insect that graces flower gardens with its beauty. It's potential to be this beautiful creature lies on the ground where it is vulnerable and can be raked up and burned by an unsuspecting gardener. Of course, if that cocoon is allowed to follow the natural course of things then it is freed to be what God created it to be.

I think of this moth somehow when listening to this story from the Gospel According to Mark about Jesus' encounter with a person who was paralyzed.

2 When [Jesus]... returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2 So 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. 3 Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4 And 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. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Maybe you hear it the way I hear it. I hear in this story a sense of hopelessness, a sense that life isn't what it should be for the one on the mat. His life not what it could be. Like the cocoon on the forest floor in the leaf debris, the potential is there but he seems to be just lying on the mat waiting. This is how I hear this Gospel account of the paralytic:

Jesus is sitting in the middle of the floor. It's a small room with stone walls and dim light. People are standing, lining the walls. In the doorway stand 4 or 5 people and behind them, it's two or three rows deep, so that those in the back cannot even hear what he's saying.

There are five men rushing to get to Jesus. One of them heard on the grape vine that Jesus was home. He thinks of his good friend who was paralyzed in a diving accident the day they went cliff diving together in those crazy days of college youth.

He'd heard about Jesus who was reported to have been healing people like his friend. So he rushed to find three other friends. One was down by the lake working on his boat. The other tending the olive press down the street. And the last one he found chipping away at a hunk of stone destined to be placed in the wall of a new house he was building.

Once together, the four of them ran to their friend's house, shared the news and their plan. But the friend wasn't very enthusiastic about the whole thing. He'd been through it all and was tired of all the answers everyone had for him. He was especially tired of hearing that if he only had more faith, he could be healed.

Someone emailed the story of a lady who called a radio pastor. The pastor was a wise, grandfatherly gentleman who has that calm reassuring voice that can melt all fear. The lady, who was obviously crying, said, "Pastor, I was born blind, and I've been blind all my life. I don't mind being blind but I have some well-meaning friends who tell me that if I had more faith I could be healed."

The pastor asked her, "Tell me, do you carry one of those white canes?"

"Yes I do," she replied.

"Then the next time someone says that, hit them over the head with the cane," He said.

"Then tell them, 'If you had more faith that wouldn't hurt!'"

When you're on the mat, when you're depressed, when you're struggling with the direction your life has taken or when crisis strikes and you're paralyzed by whatever force puts you there, the last thing you need is someone telling you that if only you prayed enough or had faith enough everything will be okay. Sometimes life can be smothered by forces that seem to extinguish hope.

One of my United Methodists colleagues put together a Facebook page for UM pastors. It's a way to ask questions of one another, seek information, keep informed and support one another. This last week one pastor posted:

I don't usually post intimate matters but my heart is heavy. I'm physically and emotionally drained but I can't sleep. In anticipation of my upcoming conference in, and long drive to, Atlanta, I'd planned an easy, work-from-home day, after a little Police Chaplain event this morning. Today was the day of the Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics. I love seeing our Special Olympians, many of whom were there this morning. Unfortunately, I got called away before the run ended to

respond to a DoA (Dead on Arrival) at a home. A 71 year old gentleman died in his bed. That was hard but I did what I could for the family and returned to my 'light day'.

Dispatch called again and there was something about her voice this time . . . Long story short, an 18 year old died in a horrific crash. She graduated just two weeks ago and was looking forward to her new job at a local casino. Death notifications are never easy but to tell the mother of an 18 year old that her baby is gone, and with it all her hopes and dreams of 'The Wedding', the first grandchild, the family vacations to the beach with said grandchild - all that is gone.

The sound a mother makes when she receives that news is something you never want to hear if you haven't already.

The only thing worse than seeing brain matter on a pavement is knowing that it came from the beautiful young life under that blanket a few feet away.

I can't pray now. I found words for everyone else today but can't find any words now. Thanks be to God for the Holy Spirit who intercedes (Romans 8). Thanks for listening, friends. (Carletta Allen)

Sometimes paralysis comes just because we are overwhelmed by too much that pins us down to the mat and we need others who can carry us through.

On the leader's count, the paralyzed man's friends lifted the mat and eased through the doorway of their friend's home. Out on the dirt street they now half-jogged, half-walked their friend to Jesus' home. But it was too late. The place was packed like the foyer of Applebee's' at 6:00 p.m. on Friday night. They couldn't even get close to Jesus.

Convinced this was their only chance to bring wholeness to their friend, they talked about other options. As they searched for another way, the fisherman among them saw a ladder leaned against the side of the house. He had an idea. Borrowed a neighbor's Sawzall, climbed the roof and began cutting a hole in the roof. Inside, the crowd was interrupted by small, falling bits of debris as they followed the white line of light created by the blade. They all looked up; shocked that someone would be tearing off the roof.

As the fisherman continued to work, prying the boards off the rafters, the air filled with dust. A widening, dust-filled shaft of sunlight focused on Jesus like a stage spotlight. Within a few minutes the man's work was done. Yelling down to his comrades, they managed to hoist their protesting friend—still on his mat--up to the roof. As the 20 or more people in the room loudly protested, Jesus had stood silently watching. When the mat filled the hole in the roof, blocking the shaft of light momentarily, Jesus stepped back. With great care -- all four men now on the roof -- they lowered their paralyzed and still protesting friend, like a Coast Guard helicopter crew lowering a lifesaving basket to drowning victims. Jesus followed the mat with his eyes until the man came into view and finally lay on the floor. The four friends peered through the hole, watching.

Jesus knew the man. The story of his accident spread quickly in Capernaum as such tragic life-stories always do in community. He lay before Jesus awaiting a response as one with little power, little means of his own to change his life-situation. He doesn't say a blessed thing. Just waits there, wondering, perhaps, what will become of him. The room is silent. Wondering

what Jesus will do. What will Jesus do with paralysis? What will Jesus do in view of four people who seem to care so much about the one on the mat that they're willing to do the bazaar if it means their friend has a chance of being whole again?

“Son,” he says, “your sins are forgiven.”

The first thing Jesus says to the man appears to have nothing to do with his physical condition. No prescription here for damaged nerve endings or atrophied muscles. As one of my NT professors put it: “The announcement of Jesus to the paralytic clarifies the human condition. The basic and universal affliction is not paralysis but sin.” (p. 19, Forming Ministry Through Bible Study: Reader's Guide To The Gospel of Mark, Van Bogard Dunn).

One of my favorite definitions of sin goes like this: sin is a person's way of saying to God, “Leave me alone!” Hell is God responding: “Okay!”

Is it possible that the man had written God off, that at some point he'd given up on God and told God bluntly, “Just leave me alone!”? Is it possible that anyone who suffers paralysis, has written off the power of hope in God's willingness to forgive? Have we lost our confidence in the power of God to resurrect life from something or someone that appears paralyzed? Have we forgotten that God has demonstrated the power of love in hopeless situations over and over again, the kind of hope found in four friends who carried their friend with the clear desire to see him made whole again?

Sometimes we need people to carry us to Christ to be reconciled with God again, to be freed from our paralysis in whatever form it might take. We need people to remind us that God hasn't given up on us even though we may have given up on God. The mat carriers did that for their friend. They reminded him that he was cared for, that there was still hope for him. Jesus reminded him he was still a child of God, cared for by God, reconciled with God, that God had not given up on him. That God still wanted him.

Sometimes we need people to remind us that God hasn't given up on us even when we're on the mat, even when life looks more like a dead cocoon in a pile of leaves than an incredible insect complimenting the beautiful blossoms from which it draws its nectar.

Do you know any mat carriers? People who take others to Jesus when they can't get there on their own power? People who trust that Jesus can give them life and healing and love?

Have you served as a mat carrier yourself?

Next week mat carriers will descend upon the city of Saginaw. One Week/One Street is about mat carrying. A city that has been paralyzed by fear and blight and hopelessness and economic injustices receives the care and support of those who come to embody the love of God with their hands, their hearts, their voices and their faith that Jesus is somehow present and bringing healing to the paralyzed. If you haven't participated in the past, consider lending a hand this year. If you can't go yourself due to work or physical limitations, then consider praying every day for those who are able or maybe help prepare lunch. Tamara Klida or Arshen Baldwin will find a place for you to put a hand on the mat.

As the church we are called to be mat carriers that the paralyzed will be free to be who God has created them to be. Years ago I attended a pastors' continuing education event in Pittsburg at Christ UMC. It's a very large congregation and the pastor at the time was Dr. Brian Bauknight. At one of the worship services, he closed his sermon with some thoughts that stuck

with me. In fact, I've kept a copy in my files because it gives me hope as we often find ourselves—as the church—on the mat and we need the healing hand of Christ to free us from paralysis.

A CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

Let me close today with an amazing illustration which I hope will give you hope! A few years ago, a unique series of columns appeared in various journals around the impact of the United Methodist Church.

The first of these was in 1991 in a journal called The Public Interest. The article was written by Roger Starr, a professor at City College in New York. Roger Starr is a *liberal, Jewish Democrat*. Remember that. It's important to the story.

Starr concluded that there was only one other period in world history that matches the day in which we live. It was 18th century England. There was the problem of addiction--they'd just discovered gin. Families were decomposing. There were problems of pollution and crime and violence and rioting--problems very much like our own.

When he discovered this, Roger Starr felt he had to study what saved England, or what brought them out of this mess. And would you believe? This liberal, Jewish, Democrat argues that the only thing that saved England was someone that he had not really heard much about--someone by the name of John Wesley who started a movement called Methodism.

"Now, I don't even know any Methodists," says Starr. "I don't know anything about them. But this Wesley started a movement that literally saved England. It was a movement that had profound social, economic, and political consequences and transformed and indeed saved that nation. And maybe what we need to do," he says, "is to study those Methodists to find out how they did it, and to duplicate what they did back in the 18th century."

About one month later, George Will wrote an editorial for The Washington Post. George Will is a *conservative Roman Catholic Republican*. Remember that. It's important to the story.

Will wrote, "I never thought I'd agree with anything Roger Starr has ever written. But you know, this liberal has actually got a point. It is that in the 18th century you've got the German and French revolutions, and other revolutions around the world; but you don't have an English Revolution. But they did, you see. It was called the Methodist revolution. Because these Methodists turned their world upside down. Maybe what we need to do is to take Roger Starr seriously and look at what was the secret of those Methodists."

Then he added, "I know this is going to sound strange for me, saying that we need some more Methodists to save this world; and I hate to end the column this way, but does anybody out there have a better idea?"

About one month later, Fred Burns, editor of The New Republic writes an article. Fred Burns is an *evangelical Episcopalian moderate*. Remember that. It's important to the story.

He writes, "Can you believe this? We've got George Will and Roger Starr agreeing on something. I can't believe it! But the more you think about it, they're exactly right. But they forgot one thing. What they forgot was that basically the Methodist Movement was at heart, a spiritual awakening. Yes, it had tremendous economic, social and political consequences, but it began as a spiritual revival--a spiritual awakening. And unless we get in this nation a spiritual awakening and a spiritual revival that will create these kinds of economic and political implications... in our day, it won't work. It's got to begin as a movement of the Spirit or else it doesn't go anywhere. But we've got to begin. We've got to have a new generation of Methodists who will do for this day what they did in the 18th century."

6 Listen! A liberal Jewish Democrat, a conservative Roman Catholic Republican, and an evangelical Episcopalian moderate all looking to the Methodists the Weslevans for the hope of our nation!

There is hope for the paralyzed. God has not given up on us and God is able to say to us or to those for whom we serve as mat-carriers: “Rise. Take up your mat and walk. I want you to be whole again. I want you with me again. I want you to walk again.”

The challenge for us this morning is to find ways to be a mat carrier. Lend a hand for someone else who just may need you to carry them in order to receive the healing presence of the loving, caring God known in Jesus.