

Transfiguration Sunday [6 Epiphany (L6B)] February 11, 2024
Mark 2:1-12

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

I'm going to do something I've rarely ever done before. I'm going to use as my text for today's sermon a reading that is not assigned to us in the lectionary for this Sunday. Looking back through my old sermons, it is a text that I have apparently never preached on. And that's because of its place in the lectionary. It is assigned to the 6th Sunday after Epiphany in year B. We don't get a 6th Sunday after Epiphany this year. In fact we have not had a 6th Sunday after Epiphany that fell in year B in the last 21 years, since I have been preaching on a weekly basis. And we won't get one until 2033, nine years from now. Well, I don't want to wait that long, and there is a good chance I'll be retired by then anyway. So today is the day.

But I'm doing this is not just for novelty of preaching on a text I haven't had a chance preach on yet. I think this text can do for us what the Transfiguration Gospel text does for us every year as we prepare to enter the season of Lent. And it can also do something that text can't, which I'll get to in a minutes. The Transfiguration story gives the disciples (and us) a vision of Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah, the two most important prophets of the Old Testament, up on a mountain, reminding us of the mountain where both of them met with God. If you want to learn more about that connection come to the Adult Sunday School this morning where I'll try to put that all together for you. The point of the Transfiguration story is this: Jesus is on par with these two giants. He is their heir in God's mission among God's people. This happens just as Jesus is preparing to go to Jerusalem to be crucified and is a way of saying that what he is doing is a part of this mission. Pay attention. That's why it's the perfect thing for us to celebrate on the last Sunday before Lent begins.

This story that I'm having us consider today instead is also about establishing Jesus' authority, giving both his disciples and the general public a taste what only Jesus and the reader of Mark's Gospel know up until now. Back in chapter one at Jesus' baptism Mark lets us peek in as the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and voice from the cloud declares him as God's beloved son. In the story, only Jesus sees and hears this. But we get let in on the secret as we hear the story told. And right from the start the secret is at risk. Unclean spirits reveal his identity. (Not that anyone believes them). Then a little later he heals a leper, and tells him not to tell anyone it was Jesus who healed him. But the leper tells anyway, and crowds of people come after him. And that's how we get this crowd thronging Jesus' house. He is becoming famous as a healer, and there are lots of people who need healing. But now the public gets a hint that there is more going on here. Jesus doesn't just heal the man brought to him by his friends, he *forgives* him. And that, Jesus seems to be saying, is really the deeper need that this man has, indeed that all people have. Our relationship with God is broken, and Jesus has come to repair that. Physical healing of illness is secondary to that root malady, and here becomes a sign of Jesus' authority, his credentials to speak and act for God. Because that, of course, is the answer to the scribes' rhetorical question, "who can forgive sins, but God alone?" No one but God can forgive sins. But what they're really grumbling about is that Jesus is infringing on the territory of the religious professionals. There is a whole system in place for forgiving sins that involves the temple and the ritual sacrifices associated with it. *That* is God's authorized way of doing things. That's what they're getting at here. "Heads up," Jesus says in response, "That system is broken. God is taking the show on the road."

So now I've kind of mixed together the first two things I want us to notice in this text, so let me pull them apart for a second for the sake of clarity. The first is the point of this story that is similar to the point of our Transfiguration Gospel text: namely that Jesus is now the focal point of God's activity in the world on behalf of humankind. The second is that forgiveness of sins is the deeper, more essential healing that the world needs because it is the means by which our broken relationship with God is repaired, and through which by extension our relationships with one another are healed. Physical healing is in the service of that deeper healing.

Now to the third thing I want us to notice in this text. It's the reason I love this story so much and could not bear to pass it by yet again because of the fickleness of the liturgical calendar. It's the four friends who are so determined to bring the paralyzed man to Jesus. They can't get through the crowd gathered around Jesus' door, so they go up on the roof, make an opening in it, and lower the man down next to Jesus. What I want you to notice, though, is how Mark describes Jesus' reaction. Here it is: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" It's not when Jesus saw the faith of the paralyzed man that he was moved to action, but when he saw the faith of his friends. That seems to break the rules about faith, at least as we have come to think about faith especially in our privatized, individualist culture. The rules we make say that faith is personal and private, just between us and God, and nobody else's business. We also make rules that say if your faith is strong, if you can muster up enough faith, God will reward you with blessings, maybe even miraculous physical healing. Have you heard people say that? Is it a rule you try to follow? What is remarkable here is that the text says nothing about the paralyzed man's faith, at least nothing explicit. Maybe his faith was included in "their faith." But maybe not. What is undeniable here is that it was the faith of this man's community that carried him to Jesus, that got him back on his feet, and was the instrument for him to hear the good news of God's love and forgiveness that brings true and lasting healing.

What better story to hear as we enter into the season of Lent, the time when we as a community of faith focus on our deepest need for healing and God's answer to that need in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for us and for our salvation? God knows there are still lots of people who need physical healing. Consult your own prayer list for the nearest examples. Then have a look at the news. The truth is that we all need healing from time to time. And in fact it's also true that we are constantly being healed all the time in all sorts of ways that we never notice, because we are marvelously made to constantly repair ourselves. That's what being healthy is. It's why good nutrition and exercise are so important and why we as a nation are so vulnerable to illness and disease. But don't get me started on that, that's another topic. In Lent, though, we remind ourselves of the deeper healing that we need, and that God is also constantly doing in our gatherings: through the words of absolution that we hear at the beginning of each service, through the good news proclaimed, read, and sung, and through the remembrance of our baptism, through the gift of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion, and also through what Martin Luther called "the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters in faith," that ministry of the gospel that we do one on one sometimes, or in small groups, that encourage us in holding on to God's promises. All of these things we share as a community of faith, and through this sharing, through faith as a communal exercise, we bear one another into Christ's healing presence. And that is particularly good news for those times when we simply cannot muster up that faith on our own. Sometimes we need to be carried. Thanks be to God then for the gift of that kind of faith, the faith of nurturing communities and families. May that faith keep us near to our Lord in good times and in bad, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.