

I Won't Let Go (*part 3 of 3 in No One Is an Island series*)

Mark 2:1-12

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If you doubted before the power of social networking, you needed only to watch the nightly news this week. One of the top news stories on local and national networks all over our country – one of the top news stories in a week in which Palestine put in a formal bid for membership in the United Nations, the American military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy formally ended, a giant satellite fell out of space, there were floods and an earthquake, the state of Georgia executed a death-row inmate, and the financial markets all over the world had dramatic ups and downs – this week, one of the top news stories on every network was that Facebook changed its layout and added a rolling "ticker" of what your friends are doing.

And while this hardly seems to be a newsworthy item, perhaps it's one thing that effected more news-watchers (and non-news-watchers) than anything else in the world this week, since now 1 in 13 people on the *planet* uses Facebook, half of them logging in every single day. That's 500,000,000 users, more than the total populations of any country in the world except China or India. Almost a third of 18-34-year-olds check Facebook on their smartphones before they even get out of bed in the morning (I admit, many mornings, this group includes me). 1 in 8 current married couples in the US met online, and a recent statistic I read said that 57% of people talk to others more online than they do in real life.

So we're more connected to more people now than we ever have been before. Just this week, on Facebook, I saw photos of an old friend's new baby when he was only a few hours old, I prayed for a friend's little boy as he went into surgery, and I heard the terrible news of someone else who lost a sibling to suicide. No one would have called me about those things. I felt connected. The execution of Troy Davis in Georgia became a bigger deal than any protested execution I've seen in my lifetime because of the Amnesty International and Innocence Project petitions that were posted on thousands of Facebook newsfeeds: people inside the prison were able to give updates via Twitter much more quickly than any prominent newspaper or television station could relay the information, even on their websites. We can suddenly be totally involved in one another's lives from across time and space – people we haven't actually talked to in years or seen in decades, including our own family. It seems, at times, as if the social network has removed all barriers of relationship.

But we know that's not entirely true. While Facebook and Myspace and Google+ and whatever other sites you're on can show you the quantity of people you "know" or even call "friend," none of those sites can facilitate the presence of a friend when you receive bad news, or the holding of a hand when you are afraid, or a laugh to break the toughest tension. I often see, now, groups of young people out together, all staring at their smartphones, checking in on Facebook and updating their statuses to let the world know that they're together in person, even though they aren't actually interacting with one another in person. We all know what it's like to feel lonely in the midst of a crowd, and today's technological connections make that all too real.

But the God who is in God's very being community, the God who made us in God's image to be in community, did not have something like Facebook in mind when we were scooped up from the dust of the earth and given to one another for companionship. I can't say for sure whether God

thinks Facebook is a good idea or not – but I do know that God created us for more than online connections: more depth, more intimacy, more vulnerability, more reality, more relationship.

And this is who the church is called to be.

There are so many things we could talk about in today's Gospel lesson from the second chapter of Mark: about the interplay between sin and sickness, the connection between church and politics in Jesus' time, the way whole classes of people could be kept down by labels from the wealthier and more powerful and even from the church. But today I want us to focus, in this story, on the four friends who delivered another straight to Jesus, despite all barriers, for healing and hope and restoration.

You can imagine the scene: Jesus has been on tour, going about the countryside healing and teaching and preaching and performing miracles, and even without the internet, without facebook or twitter or any news sites or smart phones, word is traveling fast. As soon as Jesus gets to Capernaum and puts his feet up in the house, the crowds are there: *everyone* is there, an actual mob of people crowding in as close as they can to see and hear him. The gospel says "so many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door." And yet these four guys looked around and realized that one was missing: their friend, the paralytic. Now we don't know what paralyzed this man, whether it was an illness or depression or perhaps he was born with a degenerative disease – we don't know if his muscles had atrophied or his bones curved. All we know is that he couldn't go to see Jesus on his own. So four friends came back for him, picked up the corners of his stretcher, and carried him to Jesus. When they got to the house, they couldn't get through the crowd, but they didn't let that stop them: they carried their friend up to the roof and dug through until they could lower him down in front of Jesus.

Now you might imagine the different reactions folks might have had to this: the competitive ones in the crowd might have cried, "Oh, no, we got here early fair and square – line-cutting is not allowed." The owner of the house was probably thinking, "Excuse me, you're going to pay for that roof." But Jesus doesn't hesitate. He looks not at the paralytic but at the four friends, at their love, their sacrifice, their devotion, their faith, and he says to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven."

Now this was not a popular thing among the religious folks, who thought it was blasphemy, since only God can forgive sins (they obviously hadn't caught on yet to who Jesus was). But Jesus breaks down all barriers here: showing that sin did not cause this man's paralysis, that the Temple and its rituals were not a necessary intermediary between the people and God, that the persistence of class and economy would not dictate this man's life in the kingdom. And then, this paralytic, who has been only passive to this point in the story, is told by Jesus, "Get up, take your mat and go home." And he does.

The only thing the paralytic had to do – the only thing he *could* do – in this story is to receive the grace and healing Christ offered and the help of his friends. So many things could have been different: his friends could have said, "There's no way – we'll see if we can get Jesus to come to you." Or they might have brought him a souvenir after the show. Or they could have ignored their friend entirely. Or, when they came to get him, the paralytic could have put up on a pity party, saying, "I'll just weigh you down – go on ahead without me." But they were *friends*, the kind of friends we were intended to have and to be, a friendship that resulted in forgiveness of sins and restoration of life.

We are called, in the church, to be this kind of friend to one another, to spend life not just connected with each other through technology or even through the occasional handshake and "how 'ya doin'?", but to do life *alongside* one another, sustaining each other through the joys and griefs

of life, the triumphs and tragedies, the successes and failures, the clarity and the struggles in discerning who God is calling us to be and how we are to live in the world. We're called, through our baptisms, to be holy friends for one another, not choosing each other based on similar interests or attraction, but standing by each other simply because we are all on the journey of discipleship, chosen by God and joined together in God's grace. We are called to be community for one another because we know we cannot do it alone. We are called to be the kind of friends who "challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim, and dream dreams about how we can bear witness to God's kingdom that we otherwise would not have dreamed."¹

We don't need more connections on the internet – we do not need more people who will affirm the gifts we already claim or challenge the sins we already hate or ignore the self-destructing negligence that is holding us back. We do not need more people who will show up when the party's hot but pretend to be busy when our lives are a mess and we need a shoulder to cry on. We need friends who are connected by the waters of baptism, who do not choose one another and therefore cannot disregard each other, who can stick around through good times and bad, helping us to become the holy people we were created to be. We need friends who will carry us to see Jesus when we cannot go alone. And we need to *be* the friends who will carry each other, and who, when we can do nothing more, will allow ourselves to be carried.

And where will we find these people, where will we learn to be these people, if not in the church? Now I know the church is as broken as the people in it, that we will never be a perfect image of Christian community, but our call is to work toward it, to be a place where all people can find love, support, encouragement, challenge, accountability, and hope, no matter what they've faced or where they've been or who has left them lying paralyzed on the side of the road before. This is what it means to be the church: to love God so much that we *must* love one another in life-transforming ways.

When we join a church, when we participate in a small group, when we share our lives as Christians, beyond just sitting near each other on Sunday mornings, we commit ourselves to this kind of community, saying, "in celebration and in sorrow, no matter what, I will be here for you – and together we will be here for whoever else comes our way." We say, "When things get tough I will not abandon you – and what's more, I will not let you be less than who God created you to be. I will not let you stop dreaming and discerning and doing God's work." We say, "One day I may need to be carried – but until then, let me bear the load."

Can we make life perfect for each other? Absolutely not. Will our support always be enough to heal paralysis? No guarantees. But are we called to be Christ for one another? You better believe it. Being the church is like saying to someone else, or to a whole group of someone else's, even people *you would not have chosen* in the first place, "No matter what happens, I won't let go, because we are Christ's body. No matter what happens, I won't let go."

May it be so for us, and through us for the whole world. Amen.

¹ L. Gregory Jones and Kevin Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 65. The language of "Holy friendships" comes from Jones and Armstrong.