

Fellowship of the Mat Mark 2:1-12

One of the greatest stories in the Bible about community involves a paralyzed man and the friends who brought him to Jesus.

Imagine what life was like for this man- what it would mean to be paralyzed in those days. His whole life he lived on a mat three feet wide and six feet long. Someone has to feed him, carry him, clothe him, move him to keep him from being covered with bedsores, and clean him.

He will never know the sense of independence we all want. Nothing can be done medically; no surgeries, no rehabilitation programs. There is no way to contribute to society. Anyone in this man's condition has to go through life begging for things- and be laid by the side of road, be dependent on people dropping coins beside him to live another day.

Like anybody he dreams. And I bet sometimes in his dreams he has a healthy body. He walks and runs, does good work, is married maybe, and plays with his children. Then he wakes up and looks at the ceiling of a room he can never walk out of, looks at the body that holds him prisoner, looks at the mat that fills his world- and knows he will never be free.

He has no money, no job, no influence, no family, and seemingly not much of a future. What's he got going for him? He has friends. He has amazing friends. He is in one of the greatest small groups of all time.

In one sense, this whole story takes place because of his friends. Without his friends he would never have made it to Jesus, never be healed, never received forgiveness. The best decision he ever made was to have great friends. You see four of a kind beats a full house

One of the ancient kings of Persia loved to mingle with his people in disguise. Once, dressed as a poor man,

he descended the long flight of stairs,
dark and damp to the tiny cellar where the fireman,
seated on ashes, was tending the furnace..
The king sat down beside him and began to talk.
At meal time the fireman produced some coarse black bread
and a jug of water and they ate and drank.
The king went away but returned again and again for his heart
was filled with sympathy for the lonely man.
They became very good friends as time passed.
At last the king thought, "I'll tell him who I am, and see what gift he will ask."
So he did, but the fireman didn't ask for a thing.
The king was astonished and said,
"Don't you realize that I can give you anything—a city, a throne?"
The man gently replied, "I understand your Majesty.
You have already given the greatest gift a man could receive.
You left your palace to sit with me here in this dark and lonely place.
You could give nothing more precious.
You have given yourself and that is far more than I could ever deserve."

You see friendship is the greatest gift that can ever be given.
It is in friendship that we come together each week.
We have come to help how we can and get to know
each other as Christ's friends.
Jesus said there is no higher calling than to lay down our life for a friend.
But this man's friendships didn't develop overnight.
These men choose to be friends.

There are three lessons we can learn from this story.
The first lesson this story can teach us is that we choose our community.
For the man in this story the development of these friendships
did not happen accidentally.
Because of his physical condition,
it was not likely that friendships would develop here at all.

Even today, people who wrestle with physical challenges
often say that the most difficult obstacles they face
are the attitudes of so' called normal people,
who are sometimes anxious about how to respond,
sometimes are unkind, sometimes look away and avoid meeting eye to eye.

In the United States
we live in a fast paced world, and it is not a very gracious place
for those who can't run as fast as others.
But the ancient world could be even harsher.
The Greeks regularly disposed of newborn infants with physical problems.
In Rome, there was a law to quickly kill a deformed child.

Yet, here is a little band of men who refuse to let any obstacle stop them.
And this is a key point for us:
Their little group clearly did not come about by accident.
In the face of huge obstacles-like not being accepted
by others around them, inconvenience, financial pressure,
a high cost of time and energy-they choose to become friends.

People rarely develop deep community without really trying.
Rule number one for entering into deep friendships sounds simple:
Give top priority to your relationships.
Ironically, we tend to devote massive
amounts of time to making money, running errands,
and succeeding at our jobs, but we neglect giving our most valuable possession,
time-to the experience for which we were created: community.

Take a moment and poke yourself in the bellybutton
(I'd tell you to poke your neighbor,
but that might get us into trouble!)
Our navel is a constant reminder that we all started life connected
to another human being.
We spend all of our lives trying to get reconnected to someone.
God created us as relational people.
We want the Community of the first century Christians
but we are not willing to do what they did.
"They met together daily.
" They worshiped together, ate together,
talked together, prayed together on a daily basis.
No wonder they grew so close.

We try to create first century community
on a twenty-first century timetable, and it doesn't work.
The requirement for true depth in our friendships
is allowing lots of unhurried time.
Sometimes we think we can fit deep community
into the cracks of an overloaded schedule-think again.
You cannot try to microwave friendship, parenting, or marriage.
You can't do community in a hurry: You can't listen in a hurry.
You can't mourn in a hurry with those who mourn,
or rejoice in a hurry with those who rejoice.

Many people lack great friends for the simple reason
that they have never made pursuing community a high priority.
You can't carry somebody's mat in a hurry.
And perhaps that is something we all need to learn.

The second lesson we can learn is that everyone has their own mat.
Think about what the paralyzed man
goes through in order to be friends with this group of men.
He must have wrestled with his sense of dependence.
I suspect at times he became jealous of their independence,
since after they had been together,
everyone could walk home but him.
Sometimes he must have wished in the
secret places of his heart that he could
trade places with one of them.

He must have struggled with how they saw him in his neediness.
It is a very vulnerable thing to have someone carry your mat.
When somebody's carrying your mat,
they see you in your weakness.
They might hurt you if they drop you.

There is this gift between these friends:
trusting vulnerability and dependable faithfulness.
This mat, which should have created a great gulf between him and them,
instead became an opportunity for servant hood and acceptance.
This group becomes the Fellowship of the Mat.
Wherever we love and accept and serve each other
in the face of weakness and need, there is the Fellowship of the Mat.

Here is the truth about us: Everybody has a mat.
Whether you live in the United States or some other place in the world
every person created by God has a mat.
Let the mat stand as a picture of human brokenness,
our sin and imperfection.
It is what is "not normal" about me.
But it is only when we allow others to see our mat,
when we give and receive help with each other,
that healing becomes possible, because everybody has a mat.

Maybe your mat is a temper you can't seem to control.
You lash out at the people you most want to love.
Hot words spew out of your mouth that you
know you will regret with bitter tears.
Your children sometimes look at you with frightened eyes.
You hate the way the molten anger flows out of you,
but you feel you can no more keep it in than a volcano can contain its lava.

Maybe your mat is fear.
You love to hear stories of courage and boldness.
In your mind you picture a hundred scenarios

in which you take daring risks and stand for what you know is right.
But the reality is that you can't seem to get enough courage.

Maybe your mat is an inability to trust,
or the need to be in control, or a terrible secret of some awful thing
you did that you still feel guilty about.
Maybe it is a crushing sense of failure,
or inadequacy, or plainness, or loneliness.

Sometimes people spend their whole lives
pretending they don't have a mat.
They appear to be so healthy and strong that the people
around them assume they could walk anywhere they want to.
They can see other peoples' mats but never reveal their own.
Their primary goal is to hide their brokenness.
If this is you, you may get quite good at hiding your mat.
You may convince everybody of your strength and competence.
But you will not live in community.

So let me ask you a personal question:
Who carries your mat for you sometimes? -
Who do you show your weakness and struggles to? -
Who do you ask to pray for you and with you? -
Who do you let see your brokenness?

If you want a deep friendship,
you can't always be the strong one.
Someone wrote, "A central task of community is to
create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down,
safe enough for each of us to reveal our brokenness"
You will sometimes have to let somebody else carry your mat.
That is what happens in our story.
Perhaps one of you will carry my mat or I will carry yours in our journey together.
Perhaps because one man's vulnerability is so visible,
they all became more honest about their mats.
Against all odds, they form a little community: the Fellowship of the Mat.

The third lesson is that we need to be a community of roof crashers.
Then one day Jesus comes to their town.
These four men find out about it,
and naturally they want to hear this famous rabbi.
One of them says, "We can't just go ourselves.
We've got to get our friend there.
This could really encourage him.
And maybe these things they're saying about Jesus are true.
Maybe Jesus really can heal our friend,

wouldn't that be something!
We have got to ' get him in there!"

To do that is going to make things harder to figure out,
but they're not thinking about themselves.
They are thinking of him.
Friends do that. Friends serve each other.
They tell their friend he's going to see Jesus.
And when they get to the home where Jesus is teaching,
and it is packed.
Standing room only.
"There was no room left, not even outside the door,"
the Bible says. Jesus is so close,
but they can't get through to him.
The men hadn't counted on this.

They had been so excited,
and now they're shut out.
They just watch for a while.
Then one of them says,
"How can we get him to Jesus?"
One of them gets an idea,
"Hey! What if we make a hole and lower him through the roof! "
There is silence. "Okay," they ask "any other ideas?"
There aren't any.
The hole in the roof idea is the only thing they can come up with.

They realize it's an unorthodox way to get into a room.
But four of a kind beats a full house.
They are desperate to get to Jesus.
They had decided they wouldn't let anything get in their way,
so strong is their trust in Jesus,
so great their love for their friend.
So the men get some ropes for lowering the mat and head upstairs.

It was common in houses to have an
outside staircase leading to the roof,
which was often used as a kind of patio.
The friends go up and start digging into the roof.

Imagine this: Jesus is teaching,
and because he is an excellent teacher,
people are paying close attention.
But suddenly the distraction level begins to rise.
There is a strange noise that sounds
as if it's coming from the roof.

Dirt and dust and bits of reed begin to descend from the ceiling,
getting in people's eyes and landing in their hair-
just a few flakes at first, and then a hail of large chunks of mud.
Eventually all conversation ceases and Jesus himself stops talking.
Everyone is looking up now, and there's a hole in the ceiling.
Four pairs of hands are rooting around,
making the hole bigger.
These men are devoted to their friend,
so they decide a little roofing is not going to stand in their way.
They serve him with determination, and boldness.
They become roof crashers for their friend.
And I have a feeling they will remember that moment for a long time.

Community gets built by servants.
Great community gets built by roof crashers.
Ironically, many of the barriers that
keep us isolated are surprisingly fragile,
much like the roof that stood in the way of this little community.
Perhaps the dominant community busting device
for our time is a little box with a plug on the end
that is called the television or the other box connected to the internet.

Time studies show that we in the United States
watch four hours of television a day.
Friends are people who have made a major,
roof crashing commitment to other human beings. .
How often do you do a little roof crashing?

It doesn't have to involve destruction of property.
Mostly it involves just two tasks: noticing and doing.
When you see a friend is discouraged,
you can write a note or make a phone call or speak to them.
When you know someone really needs to talk,
take the time to listen even though you're busy.

This leads us to what might be called the irony of the mat.
Our mats are usually what we are least proud of and most likely to hide.
We are often convinced that if
other people knew about our mats,
they would stay away from us.

But in reality it is precisely our mats
that form the connecting points for a deeper relationship.
I hope that as we share our mats we
can form a deeper relationship with one another.
I pray that God will allow whatever mat you have that

we can help with to be revealed.

And I also pray that each of you will help each other with your mats.

We are not here to simply fix our own mats

but to learn from each other and undergird and care for one another.

I hope that together we will be a blessing to one another

and can learn to carry each other's mat. Amen.