

SERMON: “Making Room in Our Hearts for Going the Distance.” (1 Cor 12:4-26; Mark 2:1-12)

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross, Sunday, February 5, 2012. St. James Presbyterian Church

One of my favourite movies is the 1989 Field of Dreams with Kevin Costner playing Ray Kinsella, a struggling farmer who hears a whisper one day while out in his field that rather cryptically says, “if you build it he will come.” After doing what was already inconceivable – ploughing his field over to make a baseball field (now you know why I like it) – Ray is pushed further to satisfy the whisper: beginning to think that he’s going crazy Ray takes another character to a baseball game where they hear a voice saying, “go the distance:” which is what he does. It’s a corny movie but it reveals something essential for us as we begin the new pastoral care small/GRACE group initiative, that to do something – anything – right, that to truly show your love for your neighbours, that to fully live out our commission to create honest, deep, and meaningful community, we have to do whatever it takes to bring it about; we have to go the distance. And to look at what this means, would you please turn to Mark 2:1 – you can find it on page 36 of the New Testament – and hold your bulletin up opposite the reading.

The illustration on the front of the bulletin is a 19th Century wood carving of the biblical story of Jesus healing the paralytic found in the Gospel of Mark – depicts the best example of how God wants us to go the distance when it comes to building community... not half way, but all the way. To help explain why we’re looking at this story I will be referring to a 2003 Christianity Today article by John Ortberg entitled **“Breaking and Entering”** in which he talks about what he calls the *“fellowship of the mat.”* Referring to this story about how four friends go the distance to bring their paralysed friend to Jesus, Ortberg – who is the minister of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California – says that this is a story about how we can be saved through community. Describing the man’s four friends as *“one of the killer small groups of all time,”* Ortberg highlights the amazing fact that while the story is named for the man on the mat, the story is told because of his friends: without his friends he never makes it to Jesus, never gets healed, never gets forgiven; that without being in a small group made up of people who were willing to do whatever it took, he would never have known love.

The 1st Century wasn’t any different than ours when it comes to making friends: making real, deep, friendships takes intentional work. Making room in our hearts to forge relationships requires us to overcome many obstacles: building relationships is anything but accidental. What we know, in this case, is that, given the man’s physical condition, the development of the friendships with these four men – the formation of this fellowship – must have been the result of a lot of intentional work: the deck was stacked against this man having any friends outside his immediate family at all. The ancient world was a harsh place for people like him – diseases and deformity were considered curses – or a sign of some sin – and those who had them were often killed at birth or disposed of by being sent into the wilderness. The fact that this man was alive meant that someone really loved him, but the fact that he had friends says even more.

Last week we heard how the laws God established to enable the People of Israel become Holy had been distorted to separate and segregate all that was considered unclean – including people like the man on the mat. Yet, despite these laws – and religious teachings that forbade anyone from helping let alone touching someone who was deformed – here was a band of men who refused to let any obstacle stop them. And this is a key point for us as we are looking to form a community of small groups: their little group did not come about by accident. In the face of formidable obstacles – social stigma, inconvenience, financial pressure, a high cost of time and energy – *they chose* to become friends with him: they made room in their hearts for their neighbour. Like the Acts 2 Church they did life together – they met daily, they worshiped together, ate together, prayed together daily: they showed their love for God through their willingness to obey God’s law of love over the ‘laws’ of this world.

Ortberg writes that the number one rule for entering into deep friendships is deceptively simple: We must make our relationships our top priority. Ironically, we tend to devote more time to making money, running errands, and succeeding at our jobs, but we neglect giving our most valuable possession – time – to the experience what we were created for: community. But not these guys! These men were devoted to their friend – they loved each other as God longs for us to love each other: they did what they had to even if it required carrying mats and crashing through roofs – without asking any questions, without hesitating. In this story we see the manifestation of the connection between loving God and loving people. This is the “Be-With” Plan in full flight: it is a true expression of what it means to be a Christian and to live in community.

Clearly these men must have spent a lot of time with their friend to for them to develop the kind of relationship that they had – the kind of relationship that is willing to do what they did. Their friendship – as evidenced by the looks of concern and struggle on their faces as they lower their friend into the crowded room, a room filled with the very people who made it their business to condemn those who associated with people like their friend – was one made up of trust, shared hopes, vulnerability (his and theirs), acceptance and faith. And it is their faith – not the man on the mats’ – that Jesus responds to. Looking up at their sweaty, dusty, anxious, hopeful faces focused only on their friend, the text says “*Jesus saw their faith...*” then He turns and heals their friend. And this is why we’re looking at this story: the man was saved because he lived in community – in a group made up of men who made room in their hearts for him. There’s no record of them saying anything – it’s not what He heard that moved Jesus: it was what He saw – their faith, their love for their friend, and their using their gifts to put their love into action.

The reading from 1 Corinthians about Spiritual gifts tells us that we have all been given gifts to do just what the friends in the Mark story did: we have been given gifts to build up each other – to make this a better world, to bring out the beauty of creation and each other – to reveal our love for God by using our gifts to show our love for each other. As

Paul says, we have been given these gifts to give God glory – and we can do this by building up each other and this community to be a reflection of God’s kingdom! And, just like a body made up of many parts, together, in community, our gifts complement and enhance one another’s – but only if we all participate. Sharing our gifts – making room in our hearts for one another – for the “common good” is what we are called/created to do, so, let me ask you; as we prepare to launch our GRACE Groups, wouldn’t you want to be part of a group like the fellowship of the mat? Wouldn’t you want to be part of a small group that used/shared their gifts in such a way as to build up each of its members? As we prepare to form our groups let me ask you, What gifts do you have? And how can you use them to help your group go the distance?

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to make room in our hearts for our neighbours – to love God by loving others. Amen.