

Mark 2: 1-12

**“With a Little Faith from my Friends”**

March 2, 2014

Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

A number of you know that two summers ago my spouse and I participated in RAGBRAI which stands for – the Register’s Annual Great Bike Ride Across Iowa. It was the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ride and since my spouse is from Iowa it seemed like something we had to do at least once during our lifetime.

So we did it. The ride was in Late July. We started to train in April. We felt ready when the ride began. It was one of the most interesting, fun, and hardest thing I had ever done. It was hot all the time, you were surrounded by masses of people all the time, and you had to bike 60 to 80 miles each day for six days.

People of all ages were represented – from kids and at least two dogs being pulled along in little bike trailers to people in their 80s on their antique road bikes.

There was another group that earned my deep respect: the Adaptive Sports Iowa organization made it possible for people with spinal cord injuries to participate in the ride by using hand bikes or hand cycles. It was a good size group of people, maybe 40 or so. But let me tell you: they came with an entourage – friends and family that would take care of them during the day at the pit stops and once the daily route was finished. It took a great deal of effort, from what I have read, to make people with disabilities part of this week-long bike ride. But I think it is also a testament to people working together, and having friends and family who will go out of their way to make the impossible happen.

Friends are an undervalued asset in our lives. We give all the credit to the members of our family for our wellbeing while in fact, the presence of friends has a huge impact on how we feel and how well we feel each and every day. (NY Times, April 21, 2009, Tara Parker-Pope, What are Friends For? A Longer Life)

Research has shown that having friends (and a solid social network) in our life help us to fight illness and depression, speed recovery, slow aging and prolong life.

A 10-year Australian study found that older people with a large circle of friends were 22 percent less likely to die during the study period than those with fewer friends. A large 2007 study showed an increase of nearly 60 percent in the risk for obesity among people whose friends gained weight. And last year, Harvard researchers reported that strong social ties could promote brain health as we age.

“In general, the role of friendship in our lives isn’t terribly well appreciated,” said Rebecca G. Adams, a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. “but friendship has a bigger impact on our psychological well-being than family relationships.”

Exactly why friendship has such a big effect isn’t entirely clear. While friends can run errands and pick up medicine for a sick person, the benefits go well beyond physical assistance; indeed, proximity does not seem to be a factor.

It may be that people with strong social ties also have better access to health services and care. Beyond that, however, friendship clearly has a profound psychological effect. People with strong friendships are less likely than others to get colds, perhaps because they have lower stress levels.

The University of Virginia conducted an interesting experiment along these lines: they took 34 students to the base of a steep hill and fitting them with a weighted backpack. They were then asked to estimate the steepness of the hill. Some participants stood next to friends during the exercise, while others were alone. This is my favorite part: The students who stood with friends gave lower estimates of the steepness of the hill. And the longer the friends had known each other, the less steep the hill appeared.

“People with stronger friendship networks feel like there is someone they can turn to,” said Karen A. Roberto, director of the center for gerontology at Virginia Tech. “The consistent message of these studies is that friends make your life better.” (NY Times articles)

Life got better for the paralyzed man in our story this morning. As I was thinking about the story, I couldn't help but keep hearing and singing in my head, the well know chorus lyrics from a Beatles tune:

"I get by with a little help from my friends; I get high with a little help from my friends; Going to try with a little help from my friends. "

We know nothing about this. Has he been paralyzed from birth? Was there an accident? Polio? Is he a young man robbed of mobility, or an old man with feeble knees? Or is his paralysis of a different kind, the kind of paralyzing depression that presses down against your chest as you lie in the bed each morning, a weight that won't let you get up?

Imagine for a minute the life of this man. Put yourself on the mat. Imagine living your whole life dependent on the kindness of others. Picture the bedpan for a daily companion, the bedsores for a daily plague, the empty hours spent staring up at the ceiling.

Then add the social stigma. Illness was seen as being caused by sin – either your own or that of a family member. It automatically excluded you from society. It meant poverty and dependence on charity. That this man actually has friends, four friends, is a miracle in and of itself.

And the four friends have made it their mission, to get their friend to Jesus. But when they arrive where Jesus was staying, the front door looks like the front door of Wal-Mart in the early evening hours of Thanksgiving Day. Masses of people want to get a closer look of their home town boy. It looks as if the stretcher-carriers might end up returning home without even getting a glimpse of this amazing healer.

Except for the fact that these four friends refuse to let any obstacles keep them from helping their sick friend to wholeness. They will not allow other people to keep them from Jesus.

To overcome these obstacles, they don't just think outside the box, they think up on and through the roof. They shower the people below with bits of plaster and wood and dust and a bucket full of fright, and when the opening is big enough, they lower their friend right in front of Jesus to the floor.

We don't get a reactionary commend from Jesus. But I imagine he smiles. I imagine he sees in their faith and determination a reminder of his own downward earthward journey, of his own mission to unroof the world and leave it wide open to see the Light. THIS is faith: creative, desperate, sacrificial, risky, heavy lifting, roof-raising faith. The kind that unleashes the healing, forgiving, loving power of God.

We, as followers of Christ and as people of faith are called to unleash the healing, forgiving, and loving power of God. This is not just a task reserved for Jesus or his disciples. We are here to make life better in any way we can, not just for those in our care, but for all of humanity.

You might say that your faith might not be strong enough or well-formed enough or mature enough to unleash the healing, forgiving power of God. Actually it is unleashed each and every day. I see it all the time.

This healing, forgiving, loving power comes to us and goes out from us in the hugs given and received, the casserole dropped off, the ride given to the doctors, the phone call made just to say 'hi', the vigil held at someone's bedside, the hands held in prayer. When we share with you "concerns and celebrations" we don't mean to share the latest news and gossip with you. It is our hope and desire for us to unleash the healing, forgiving, loving power of God upon the people mentioned through our communal and personal prayers.

Not everyone is able to be a "roof raisers" to support a friend in their journey toward healing and wholeness. But we all have an important gift to bring to the table: we can have faith on behalf of someone else. We can believe in them, pray for them, imagine them in God's healing light, and support them. Our prayer and faith can be the tipping point between health and illness, between wholeness and brokenness, between life and death for another person.

We live in an interdependent universe. As much as our actions have an effect on the physical world, I believe that our prayers create a healing force around those for whom we pray. They add energy and open possibility at an unconscious level, our prayers may even open the door for a greater influx of God's presence, enabling God to be active in ways that would not have been possible without prayers.

If you are looking for something spiritual to do during the season of Lent, I encourage you to surround a specific person or persons in prayer ... reach out to someone who is struggling in life ... and share realistic yet life-changing words of hope.

Our faith is a gift for sure, and used to its full potential, it has the power to unleash the healing, forgiving, love of God. Amen.