

SERMON for Sunday, February 19, 2006
Isaiah 43:18-25, Mark 2:1-12

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Just Amazing

This is a week of amazing feats. The flashing skates of the speed skaters, where less than a thousandth of a second separates the first place finisher from the last, but where every skater is a model of persistence and dedication. The swift plunge of the lugers, where one hundredth of a second makes a difference between gold and silver, but where everyone who competes displays courage. The swift and almost silent path of the cross-country skiers, where after trekking through snowy trails, six hundredths of a second measures the final winner, but where sheer doggedness and superb conditioning should earn a title for everyone. If you're tired of the Olympics, and some of us have ceased being fascinated while others of us can't get enough, feats of a different sort continue at the Coliseum with the annual circus performances. We could all name a lot of other amazing feats, and not at all physical. Some are academic achievements of solving complex math problems, writing beautiful poetry, critically analyzing achievements and errors of history. Some are unlocking the secrets of diseases and space. And sometimes the most amazing feats of all are the ones we can't see, like the persistent compassionate presence of a spouse, a daughter, a son, a mother, a father at a hospital or hospice bedside, or the hundreds of daily prayers of the members of this congregation for those of this family in need, or the patience of parents and teachers as they guide and nurture children. The human body, the human mind, the human spirit – just amazing.

In Vacation Bible School, years ago, we made a little cardboard house, modeled after the Biblical little house, with a flat roof. We crafted a cot-like stretcher, and made figures with popsicle sticks for legs and arms and scraps of fabric for clothes, and cotton balls for heads. After a couple of days of hard work in the hot summer mornings, on the final day of Vacation Bible School, the drama came to life. The popsicle stick Jesus was in the house with an audience of a few popsicle sticks. Down the paper road came four popsicle stick friends carrying a popsicle stick patient on the stretcher, which they couldn't fit through the door of the house. How would they get it in? They found a popsicle stick ladder, propped it up against the house, took off the removable section of the roof, tied some string to the stretcher and lowered it down to the living room, right in front of the astonished popsicle stick Jesus. After an intense encounter, and the words, "Get up!" from Jesus, the popsicle stick sick man who couldn't walk at all gets up and walks out the door. The end. At least the end of the Vacation Bible School dramatization of the gospel according to Mark, chapter 2. It was truly a labor of love on the part of every Bible School or Sunday School teacher who ever took on such a project, and their name is legion. It was truly an artistic accomplishment for all the six, seven, and eight year-olds who took part. But the story is not over.

The gospel lesson we enacted as children might not have been correct in its Biblical and theological interpretation, and certainly not profound in understanding all the ramifications of Jesus' teachings, of the distinctions and connections between healing and forgiveness. It might not have explored the conflict and clash between Jesus and the religious leaders over authority. But it was an amazing feat. For somehow, in this story, whether seen with the eyes of a child or from the perspective of a more

seasoned adult, we know of faith, of courage, of forgiveness, of healing, of wholeness. And that is amazing.

"Get up, and go on your way." What good news this was to the man that lay before Jesus, and good news to his friends, good news to everyone. The burdens that had weighed so heavily were lifted, and he was healed. Now, he may not have been cured, but he was healed by Jesus, healed with forgiveness and love and made whole. This unnamed man was able to receive the newness God through Jesus offered. With the words "You are forgiven" hope was reborn and the future opened. This forgiveness thing is difficult for us, as difficult as it was for the scribes that sat and pondered, that thought perhaps too long and too convoluted and without understanding. They did not quite get who Jesus was, who he was and what he had done in their very midst. Concerning themselves more with who could forgive, they overlooked the power of forgiveness.

The power of forgiveness from one person to another can change lives. Professor Robert Enright, of the University of Wisconsin Department of Educational Psychology, has studied, researched, written and taught about forgiveness, about the effects forgiveness can have on emotional and mental health. He has studied it not from a religious perspective, although there are certainly religious and spiritual dimensions. Quite simply, what he has researched has been that when a person suffers from unjust and unfair treatment from someone else, and experiences anger, hate, self-pity, and holds grudges, the way to be healed is to forgive the person that hurt you. It does not mean that you excuse their behavior, or forget it, or pardon it, or approve. It does mean that you let go of the destructive emotions that hurt you more than anyone else, and no longer let that other person have power over you, that you accept that nothing that you do to punish them will heal you. You work to demonstrate the qualities of compassion, generosity, and charitable love. You let go, and throw off the heavy burden you have been carrying, you stand up, and walk free. Of course, to forgive someone who has hurt you deeply is not necessarily easy, but necessary for joy, for love.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa headed up that country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission which worked for the healing of the country following apartheid, the separation of the races that almost destroyed that country. By providing a forum in which those had who had victimized and harmed others could confess, this commission opened up a way for completing the cycle of forgiveness. Tutu said, "We are looking to the healing of relationships. We are seeking to open wounds, yes, but to open them so that we can cleanse them and they don't fester; we cleanse them and then pour oil on them, and then we can move into the glorious future that God is opening up for us." In South Africa the wounds of many years are deep, and the scars are thick. But Tutu's vision and the power of forgiveness have begun to heal a nation.

I always thought the turning point of the story of the man who was brought to Jesus by his friends was at the end, when the man stood up and walked! And if the story was solely about healing, it would. This encounter with Jesus was different. The turning point was when Jesus proclaimed, loud and clear, "You are forgiven!" When the bystanders in our Biblical story saw what had happened, they were amazed, for they had never seen anything like it before. In our worship, every week, we proclaim God's forgiveness. "With joy, I proclaim to you that Almighty God, rich in mercy, abundant in love, forgives you all your sin and grants you newness of life in Jesus Christ." We say these words after we join together in confession of faith, we say

them almost too casually, automatically, when many of us are still coming in and sitting down, shrugging off our coats, and greeting our neighbors in the pews. But this, too, is our turning point, not only today but again and again. Like the paralyzed man who was now free to get up and walk, so our burden has been lifted, and we are free from all those sins that weigh us down.

In the play *A Thousand Clowns*, by Herb Gardner, the main character is Murray Burns, a loveable, affable kind of guy who lives in New York. Murray is prone to trying various social experiments in an effort to try to make connections and improve the lives of those around him, in an off-beat sort of way. One morning he stands on the corner of 51st and Lexington in mid-town Manhattan, and offers an apology to everyone who walks by, saying simply, "I'm sorry". And invariably he receives a response, like, "That's ok" or "I know you didn't mean to". And Murray muses, "That's the most you can expect from life, a really good apology for all the things you won't get." Pastor Debra Farrington takes Murray's story one step further, and writes, "And so Murray was wrong: a good apology is not the best we can expect in this life. True, we do well to give a good apology - to God and to those we have harmed. But the best thing we can expect in this life - and it is already promised and given - is a good dose of forgiveness. God stands on every street corner 24 hours a day and seven days a week, telling each of us, 'You are forgiven.'"

I was driving to a meeting in LaCrosse on Friday and had the music turned up loudly in the car, trying to keep the beat and sing and keep the warm air circulating in an effort to keep warm. I was listening to one of my favorite CDs from a men's a capella group, Chanticleer. The last number is a rousing arrangement of an African American spiritual, *I am a Pilgrim*. The theme of the song is being a pilgrim in this world, traveling to the promised land, and all that we can do while here on earth is our best. Here are some of the words,
*I've been tempted, I've been tried. I've been discouraged on every side.
 While I'm traveling through this land, Lord, I'll do the best I can.
 Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down, almost level to the ground,
 While I'm traveling through this land, Lord, I'll do the best I can.*

As the interstate miles unfolded, the beat of the music thumped - and yes, I was one of the cars you could hear if you were driving next to me - and since I was alone in the car I could sing as loud as I wanted, *Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down, almost level to the ground...* And what thumped into and from my soul was the realization that burdens do crush us to the ground, the burdens of worrying too much, of trying to control too much, of pushing people away and not letting them get too close, of ignoring the cries of our children for attention and ignoring the cries of the world's children for food. We carry the burdens of that which has kept us on an island of loneliness, of tolerating war, of letting disagreements multiply into years of estrangement, of paying more attention to our favorite sports or entertainment stars than to the nourishment of our own minds, of letting distance grow between us and God. *Almost level to the ground...* but we are not going to stay there, you and I, because Jesus says, "You are forgiven". And we are going to get up and walk. The song ends with a rousing, *My soul will be happy! My soul will be happy!* We may not be physically cured, but we will be healed. Isn't that just amazing?

Thanks be to God. Amen.