

## I Am, Because We Are

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 2:1** When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. <sup>2</sup> So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. <sup>3</sup> Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. <sup>4</sup> And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

When Melis and I were dating, we were undergrads at the University of Texas. For fun, we attended a few classes the Presbyterian Seminary just north of campus. This by the by is the one of the ways you know you might be called to ministry. Some people might go to hear live music or hit the clubs to go dancing for fun. I sat in on seminary classes with names like Christology and Atonement on top of my regular course load. Now *there's* a party!

One of the interesting things at Austin Seminary when we were there is that they had a fairly large African community that had come over to study- mainly folks from Ghana. And in the classes I took one of the things I remember is the African students remarking how different it was to be in America compared to being back home. And some things they liked- obviously it was great to be safe and to have so much abundance. And apparently Tex-Mex was good even compared to African food. But some of the change wasn't so positive- we were so busy and so hectic they observed. Sure, we have so much, but what's the point if we're always rushing around, a scowl on our face, a cell phone connected to our ear? And we seem so individualistic to them, with so little sense of community- everyone wrapped up in their own little world. They noticed how we often complain about being lonely and how we say we want community but then we prize

our privacy above nearly everything else. Now we had been talking about philosophy in one class, and one of the students said that maybe our individualism has something to do with how we have been shaped by Descartes' great motto "I think therefore I am", in part meaning I don't really need anyone else to be OK, I just need me, myself, and my thoughts. He said Africans lived in an entirely different way. He said they lived according to the motto: "I am, because we are." I am only because we are. He said they have such a sense of community and family where he came from- a sense of the tribe. And he thought of all the things his culture had to learn from ours, maybe this might be a lesson ours might learn from his.

I am, because we are.

You know I think he was right. I believe that sense of community is something we need if we're going to survive as a culture. Even if we don't acknowledge it much, we need community like we need air, water, and food. But we don't think we have to go all the way to Ghana to realize this, either. We just have to travel as far as the closest copy of the Gospel of Mark. See, in this brief story that Mark tells with such economy, we hear some of the best news about community in all of the New Testament.

Now, the story starts out with a fascinating detail that most of us just skip over. The story starts out with Jesus in a place we almost never associate him with- it starts out with Jesus at home. You know, of all the images I've seen of Jesus over the years, I don't think I've ever seen a single one portraying him at home. On the road- healing

others or teaching; there are plenty of those. On the cross- there are certainly a ton of those hanging around. I remember worshipping at a Lutheran church in Austin that had that weird Dali version of the crucifixion with Jesus like hovering above the cross- it's not my favorite image but I've never been able to shake it. There is just a ton of art out there focusing on Jesus, but I don't know if there is a single painting or sculpture in the entire world depicting Jesus with his slippers and pipe at home.

Yet there he is. Mark tells us Jesus went to Capernaum and it was reported that he was at home. And like Mick Jagger or Jon Bon Jovi, when people find out where Jesus is, it doesn't matter where it is- they stampede the place. Mark describes my worst nightmare- there Jesus is at home, whether it's his family home or, less likely, his own personal dwelling, we don't know. And all of us a sudden he's just mobbed- Mark writes so many gathered around there was no more room for anyone even around the door. And my favorite line- Mark says Jesus spoke the word to them. Yeah, I bet he did. I can only imagine the word I'd pick if I were him- poor guy can't even go home and prop up his feet without being bombarded by first century paparazzi.

Now it's right here that a most interesting thing happens. In the midst of all this chaos hardly anyone notices four men approaching carrying a man in a stretcher. If anyone had been paying attention they would have seen the faces of these men absolutely fall to the ground in horror and disbelief when they got closer and saw how big that crowd was.

See, a while back there had been a terrible accident. Their friend had been severely hurt- paralyzed. And they didn't know quite what to do. Then they heard a rumor about a healer near by. Now their friend couldn't walk. He couldn't get himself

there- and so these men, these true friends, decided they would be his legs; they would be his arms.

And they figured, as they were hauling their friend who hadn't seemed nearly as heavy when they started the journey, that just getting him there would be the challenge. But then they arrived in Capernaum, exhausted but elated that they finally made it. And they hear the crowd and follow the noise thinking they'd just walk right up there and see if this Yeshua was for real or not, but then when they drew near, they saw immediately that hauling their friend there in the desert was the easy part- actually getting him in to see Jesus looked like it was going to be impossible. If they were going to get their friend in to see this healer- it was going to take some work.

This story reminds me so much of a book I just finished- a book called The Perfect Mile, by Neal Bascomb. Bascomb tells the story of three men and their quest to break the four minute mile back in the 50's. Now as some of you might remember, Roger Bannister, an Englishman, is famous as the first person to ever break the 4 minute mile barrier in 1954, but he really wasn't the one that interested me in the book. No, it was an Australian by the name of John Landy who really captured my imagination.

Landy was born in 1930 on April 12<sup>th</sup>, the day before my wife's birthday on the 13<sup>th</sup>. He was born in a rural area outside Melbourne, Australia. Now, Australia wasn't a country that cared for running much, but that didn't stop Landy- he ran anyway. He ran so well he actually went to the Olympics in Helsinki in 1952- where he got clobbered. He ran so badly, not even running the mile in 4:14, that he didn't even qualify to run in the final race. But despite what could have been just a crushing defeat, Landy ended up

making the most of it. He spent as much time as he could talking with other runners there- runners like Emile Zatopek, the famous Czeck runner who swept that Olympics.

And Landy went back home to Australia, but rather than hanging up his spikes in defeat- he trained harder than anyone else in the country. His typical schedule- he left the house at 8, walked a mile to the train station, headed into Melbourne where he was an agriculture student, came home, studied in the evening, and then snuck out and ran around the roads of Australia into the wee hours of the night. He'd crash way after 12, and then get up the next morning and do it all over again. He was the definition of a lone wolf. And it seemed to be working.

He trained so hard he ended up shocking the world by running the 3<sup>rd</sup> fastest mile in history, 4.02.1 right on the heels of his embarrassing defeat. And just like that, Landy was Australian's hope to break the 4 minute barrier. So he, along with Roger Bannister in England, and an American Wes Santee, continued training longer and harder- pushing themselves to be the first.

Now Landy probably trained the hardest, but it took more than just training to break the barrier- it took a little bit of luck. Just the slightest bit of wind, a track that wasn't in perfect condition, could make a second's bit of difference. Landy had several races in which he was close- but some little problem caused him to miss. And then he had a difficult set back- in January of '54 Landy had absolutely perfect conditions in Melbourne. It was a beautiful clear day, there was no wind. The track was in great shape. And like always, he just blasted away the competition, running yards ahead of anyone else- basically running a race of his own. But even with these perfect conditions- this man who trained alone and worked so hard, came up short- running a disappointing

4.02. After this race he said one of the most interesting things in the whole book. When asked about his thoughts on missing the barrier this absolute loner said, “I am convinced I must have someone to grind record figures out of me. I must have someone behind me to push me out.” This man, so used to running all alone, realized it was going to take others to bring out the best in him.

I am because we are.

You know, sometimes we simply can't do everything on our own- sometimes we need the help, the support of others, of community. The friends of that man lying there in the stretcher were dismayed, but they hadn't gone all that way just to turn around. So you know what they did? They couldn't go in. They couldn't really dig under. So they decided to climb up and over that house, using every bit of their strength to keep one hand on the wall while another was carrying their friend. And when they made it to the top- like thieves, they dug through the reeds and the dried mud. Oh, they dug right through that roof, and when they had a hole big enough- they yelled out “Hey, sorry about that!” And then they lowered their friend down. And Jesus, Jesus doesn't call the police or reach for his base ball bat like I would have. No, Jesus seems just fine with folk's dropping in like this, and he restores the man's health. But the lowering down of the man; the healing itself; we get all caught up in details like these, but this isn't really what's unusual about the text- what's unusual is what Jesus says. Did you catch it?

Time after time in scripture, Jesus says to a man or woman, “Your faith has made you well.” “Your faith has saved you.” You. Your. Here what does Jesus say? Mark

writes, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” When Jesus saw *their* faith. *Theirs*- not his.

Those Africans are right. We Americans are pretty obsessed with ourselves. Forget Descartes and *cogito ergo sum*- for America today a more honest slogan is really: “It’s all about me.” We are so preoccupied with *our* individual beliefs and choices. We think of faith being like a leap each one of us has to make- alone. I grew up hearing people had to decide whether they were going to make a choice for Christ.

But then you come across a text like this and you realize we’re like someone watching a movie with the sound turned off- we’ve been missing at least half of what’s going on in Scripture. Sure what you and I think is important. Sure faith can be a little bit like an individual leap sometimes. And sure, people do make choices. But. But, when we come across a text like this one where Jesus heals a man NOT because of *his* faith, but because of the faith of others, the faith of his friends, why, we realize faith isn’t always about individuals but sometimes it’s about community. In the Bible faith isn’t so much I and me, but us and we. And this is good news, because there are days and nights you and I just don’t have the strength to believe in Jesus anymore. This is true for me- I don’t mind saying it. There are times we just run out of faith, and Mark promises that when this happens we’ve got to rely on others to believe with and for us.

I am only because we are.

This is our third Sunday in our Lenten series on worship. The first Sunday we looked at the Call to Worship. Last week we talked about the Prayer of Confession. This

morning we're looking at the Affirmation of Faith- the moment in our worship, usually after the sermon, when we say together words from one of the great creeds of the church. For a long time now we've been saying words from our Brief Statement of Faith written back in 1983. Now, like the Prayer of Confession, I know this is not always a well understood or popular part of our service. I'll tell you on a personal note- I used to absolutely HATE the affirmation of faith. My mom always told me to tell the truth, especially in church, but there we would all be- standing up saying things like "Very God from Very God" and saying Christ descended into Hell, and I knew we didn't always understand or agree with what we were saying. And this wouldn't be such a problem except that we stand and affirm them together- with one voice. I hated it- it was like everybody shut their minds off and went into autopilot. It was like the church was trying to brain wash us into some bygone 4<sup>th</sup> century orthodoxy.

Well, today I feel differently. In fact today the affirmation of faith is one of my favorite moments in the church. What changed? Well, it is true that learning more about the creeds and the people who wrote them and turmoil in which they were written really did help. And we could certainly do more education on that here. But that isn't really what changed my heart. What changed my heart was a frail Roman Catholic old man with heart trouble I prayed with once when I was a chaplain back in New Jersey. I don't remember his name. I just remember it was late in the day, and the priest was unable to get to all the patients that day, so I went in for a visit. We talked a little, and then I offered prayer and he nodded. And then I proceeded in my protestant way of just praying about what had come up in conversation- trying to lift this man's concerns into God's

hands. And he stopped me. He very gently touched my hand and looked at me kindly. I opened my eyes and stopped.

“You know what would be nice?” he asked me. I was silent. “Do you know the Apostles’ Creed?”

And without a beat I began to recite those ancient words, “I believe in God the Father Almighty,” words that before that point, I never really cared for. And he joined in- and I realized for the first time in my life that church, the true church, isn’t just about me and what I like and don’t like. The true church is about us. That tired old man didn’t care whether I liked the creed or agreed with every little thing in it- he just wanted to speak the words Christians had spoken for centuries and know as he lay in that room all alone that night that as long as he could do this- he wouldn’t really be all alone.

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Well, after Landy ran that disappointing mile, he faced even another setback. Just a few months later, in May of 1954, Roger Bannister finally broke the four minute mile- the first person ever recorded to do so. Like the disappointment in Helsinki, I would have understood if Landy had just decided to focus his efforts elsewhere. But he didn’t. Somehow scraping the money together he had traveled to Finland that summer to run on Finnish tracks- famous for their quality. Undaunted by Bannister’s accomplishment. Landy continued to run. And then, just a few weeks after Bannister’s momentous achievement, Landy entered a race in Finland against one of Bannister’s own training partners, Chris Chataway. And though Chataway hadn’t proved himself quite as fast as

Landy, he made it clear he was there to win. And it was running with men like this, up against this kind of pressure, this kind of world class competition that Landy rose to greatness, shattering Bannister's world record not by a smidgen, but by a full two seconds running the mile in 3.58. The world was stunned. And Landy was right- he simply couldn't achieve greatness on his own- he needed others; others to learn from like Zatopec, and others to push him like Chataway.

Beloved, every generation has to claim Christ in their own way- using their own language and in their own voice. There's no doubt about that. But every generation, every church also has to remember they stand on the shoulders of giants. We are only here today because our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith. When we affirm our faith together in worship, sometimes we're learning, sometimes we are on auto-pilot, sometimes we're disagreeing, and sometimes we're confused. But whatever we're doing, let us remember when we affirm our faith as one body, we are at that moment either acting like the friends of the paralytic and having faith with and for those that don't; or we maybe ourselves are that paralytic, not able this morning to hope and in need of good friends who will be our arms and our legs and who know that in Christ, I am, only because we are. **Amen.**