

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 2/19/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: Mark 2:1-12

One morning this past week, I received a call telling me that a parishioner was on the way to the emergency room at Phelps Hospital. Usually in such a case, I can be out the door of my house and at the person's side in twenty minutes or less.

I was at Phelps within twenty minutes, but it took me at least another twenty minutes to park. What chaos I encountered there! Phelps is in the process of building a new emergency room, so several of the parking lots for visitors are no longer parking lots for visitors. Snowplows had deposited mounds of snow in some of the places where a car could ordinarily squeeze in. The three spots designated for clergy were, as always, taken.

While there was valet parking at the main hospital entrance, I wasn't headed there. I, and about a hundred other cars, it seemed, circled around and around the complex, trying to get anywhere near the emergency room, the medical office building, or Memorial Sloan Kettering's clinic. Many people simply stopped their cars and put on their turn signals to wait for someone to eventually return to his or her car and pull out of a space in that particular row. That move created unbelievable traffic jams as people then had to go around them, often coming head to head with someone who was doing exactly the same thing from the opposite direction. I finally abandoned my car, completely illegally and in full view of a security guard, shouting "clergy!" as I ran past him to try to reach the parishioner in the ER.

The traffic congestion at Phelps was the image that came to mind as I read the story from Mark's gospel appointed for today. The text says that so many people gathered around Jesus, in the house where he was speaking, that there was no longer any room. The house was teeming with people. No one could get in or out. Anyone who had decided on the spur of the moment to check out what Jesus had to say didn't have a prayer of even getting inside the house, let alone anywhere near Jesus himself.

The paralyzed man and his friends clearly hadn't planned ahead, and they couldn't get close enough to catch a glimpse of Jesus. It would have been extremely difficult for one healthy person to push one's way forward, through that crowd. It would have been impossible for four men carrying yet another on a mat.

But coming into the presence of Jesus was so important to these folks that they devised an usual and creative plan. They maneuvered themselves and the man on the mat up the outside steps that led to the flat roof of the house; somehow slid aside one of the large stone slabs on the roof; dug through the sticks and the sod that was underneath; and lowered the paralyzed man right down into the crowd, directly in front of Jesus. The whole thing was a really risky process. They could have dropped their friend as they tried to negotiate the stairs. The roof might have collapsed, injuring not only all of them, but also Jesus and the others below. It took a lot of determination and nerve to do what they did.

And to what end? What was it that they were seeking? What was it that the paralytic experienced when he was finally in the presence of Jesus? He experienced the One who could see into his heart, who loved him deeply, and who had the power to restore him – physically and spiritually. Jesus forgave his sins and cured his infirmity. In Jesus' presence, the paralyzed man became whole.

We, too, need to be in the presence of Jesus in order to be restored to wholeness. We need to come before Jesus with all of our doubts and fears, with all of our inadequacies and weaknesses, acknowledging the ways we've forgotten God. We need to be in the presence of Jesus – to put before him our deepest needs, the desires of our hearts, and our willingness to be forgiven and healed. But how do we do that when we aren't able to come into the physical presence of the man Jesus of Nazareth, as the paralytic did?

As Christians, we believe that Jesus was the full and perfect revelation of God, and that the Spirit of Christ is as present to us today as was his physical presence to those who kept company with him two thousand years ago. The Spirit of Christ is within each of us. The Spirit of Christ is present when two or three of us walk or have coffee together. The Spirit of Christ is in our midst as we gather together in worship and to share the Eucharist. The Spirit of Christ is with us and among us as we care for each other and as we respond to the needs of those who suffer in our community and beyond.

Christ, with and among us, is actually what "the church" is. The church, really, is the body of Christ, and the body of Christ isn't a building, or a weekly obligation. The church is the body of Christ, in and through which the Spirit of Christ is powerfully present. In the presence of Christ, we're known and loved for who we are. We're forgiven. We're restored to wholeness. We're empowered.

If this is true, then what keeps us from more fully embracing this truth in our lives? What prevents us from making our life in Christ and our commitment to the body of Christ the core of our being, the very foundation of our lives, the priority around which everything else is arranged?

The image of the traffic at Phelps Hospital comes to mind again. Our lives are jam-packed with work, school, family, and all of the responsibilities and logistical details that accompany them. There seems to be no open space in our lives, no room to maneuver. There's so much crammed into our lives that it sometimes feels close to impossible to draw near to the One for whom our soul yearns. There seems to be no unobstructed route by which to get there.

The season of Lent is nearly upon us. Two weeks from today will be the first Sunday in Lent. Ten days from now will be Ash Wednesday. Might we try to be bold and creative as we embark on our spiritual pilgrimage of that season of reflection and of returning to God? Could we take a drastic step or two to eliminate or circumvent some of the traffic in our lives in order to intentionally place ourselves in the presence of Christ in solitude, with others in the body of Christ, in service to those in need?

The March newsletter that's just been mailed out and a special Lenten brochure that will be available next Sunday offer possibilities for us – the body of Christ here at St. A's – to draw near to God, to be in Christ's presence, during the weeks of Lent. The presence of Christ is within us and among us, and Christ's love, forgiveness, and healing await us.

Christ is here, and we don't have to tear off the roof of this building to come into Christ's presence. But we do need to clear a path in the traffic jam of our lives, to make room for ourselves to recognize and receive Christ's presence, love, forgiveness, and healing. May our deepest desire be to seek Christ's presence and to receive all that's waiting for us there. Amen.