

THE ROOF OPENERS

Pilgrim Church, Duluth February 22, 1976

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Mark 2:3-4

If you have ever been a tourist, you cannot have escaped visiting the home of some famous person of the past. There are so many such houses preserved as museums. As for myself, I think I have passed through the dwelling places of half the people whose names appear in the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Some of these tours through the homes of the celebrated and the notorious turn out to be a bore. Others prove disappointing. Louisa May Alcott's house in Concord, Massachusetts was closed when my family got there. But you could tell from the outside that it was very different from the house where June Allyson lived in Little Women.

Yet sometimes such pilgrimages prove illuminating and profoundly moving. I think of the little room at the foot of the Spanish stairs in Rome where John Keats "ceased to be" at the age of twenty-five when hardly had his pen begun to "glean /that/ teeming brain." Afterwards, the local authorities scraped the walls and removed the floor and ceiling for fear that others would catch the fatal consumption. But going there you are reminded of something he gave this grief-strewn world, "the thing of beauty" /that/ "is a joy forever."

I think of the pile of rocks supposedly locating the site where Henry Thoreau set up his little cabin on Walden Pond. How odd that people should search out the spot where a man tried so resolutely to be alone. Yet out of his aloneness he made half the world neighbor to his retreat.

Sometimes such places speak to us of people who have lifted us on their shoulders and carried us to the place of inspiration, of beauty and of truth.

And there was one other house I shall not forget. It is an excavated ruin a few feet from Lake Galilee. It is known as "Peter's House," though, of course, no one can be sure that Peter lived there. Yet it was in some such house in the village of Capernaum that Jesus sat in the middle of a crowd one day. And it was to such a house that four men came bearing a friend on a stretcher. They were four men who demonstrated the ingenuity of love and of the insistence of faith.

Suppose we take a longer look at these men now, a look that frankly employs a dash of imagination. We are here in Capernaum. It is a busy little city, situated on the road to Damascus. It is also a fishing port on Lake Galilee. There is a toll booth here, a rather elegant synagogue and a Roman garrison. And lately this town has served as headquarters for a celebrated prophet from Nazareth. One Jesus. He was away for a while. But now word sweeps the streets that he is back. He is keeping open house, not in the synagogue where the Pharisees have been making trouble, but in one of the homes of the fisherfolk. And now people are converging on that little house from all parts of town. The sick, the guilt-laden, the curious, the suspicious, - they are all there. "And he is preaching the word to them."

The news comes as well to the four men. They are active men and they might well have obtained front row seats at the prophet's feet. But these men are delayed by a concern. This day in the bazaar we may imagine a conversation something like this:

"Hey Ben, I hear Jesus of Nazareth is in town."

"Where?"

"At the house of Simon the fisherman."

"Well, what do you say we take poor Abe to see him."

"That's a good idea. You get Isaac and I'll bring Joseph."

"All right. I'll meet you at Abe's place in an hour."

Here are four men with jobs to do and appointments to keep. They are men who when they get a little time to themselves are in the habit of running off to whatever it is that serves the purpose of a golf course or a bowling alley in a place like this. Here are four men who drop everything so that they can lift up the life of one other man and bring that life into healing touch with Christ.

"And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men."

It is a little house, a typical dwelling of the poor. It is a big crowd, so big that there is no room even about the door. This obstructing crowd is always coming into view in the gospels. My sermon has to do with the mutuality of Christianity, with the fact that faith works in fellowship, with the indispensability of the Church. But the presence of the crowd provides a corrective note. Men in the mass may constitute not a means of grace, but simply a wall. The crowd is there and the crowd will not let us in.

So the four men stand there in the street, looking things over and wondering how. Will they turn back? Will they pat their paralyzed friend on the shoulder and say, "We're sorry, Abe, but it looks like we can't get in. It probably wouldn't have made any difference anyway." Not these men. No - because when they think about Abe there is something that gnaws their insides. And when they think about the prophet, there is something that summons them forward despite all obstacles. They mean to get Abe into that house if they have to take it apart piece by piece. If they can't get in through the door, politely and conventionally, then they will smash their way in through the roof.

"And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay."

Well, you know once a preacher gets going he does not particularly appreciate interruptions. It is bad enough when the baby that wouldn't stay in the nursery starts to cry, or when Mrs. Delany drops her glasses and then compounds her crime by breaking into giggles. For everyone looks around then. They've all been waiting for this opportunity, for any distraction that will provide them with an excuse to stop making believe that

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the preacher is holding them in some sort of hypnotic trance. But when they demolish the roof above your head and start lowering down people on stretchers, the game is up.

We may imagine then that the sermon comes to an abrupt halt. But the speaker is not disconcerted. He is not angry. As P.T. Forsyth observed Christ seems to put a higher value on spiritual aggressiveness than he does on submission. "Knock," he said, knock like a householder trying to wake up a surly neighbor in the middle of the night. "Knock and it shall be opened." Well, these men have knocked.

Jesus looks at the situation with those perceptive eyes of his. He looks at the crowd, shocked, amused, sensation-seeking. He looks at the scribes, stalking him now, ready to tear him to shreds. He looks at the figure at his feet, crippled in soul and body. He looks up at those four sweaty faces framed by the clouds. And he sees something. He sees the working power of their faith.

"And when Jesus saw their faith..."

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Note the possessive adjective here. For that is the astonishing reality here. We do not read, "his faith," meaning only the faith of the paralytic. We read "their faith", meaning the faith of the four men.

For, you see, we are not alone here. We never get to Christ all by ourselves. To be sure, religious faith is highly personal. There is a sense in which we stand before God in stark isolation, naked of all associations, stand in our own singularity accountable for ourselves alone. There is a point at which no one else can do our own thinking for us, or our praying, or dream our dreams, or do our sinning for us either. No man can trespass on that bit of private property which is my self. Nor can I trade my self for a better plot of ground in order to build up more equity in heaven.

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We stand by ourselves. But we stand with others too. This we need to learn, we individualistic Americans, we Protestants, we Congregationalists. "No man is an island entire of itself." Even less is any Christian a Christian apart from the "household of faith." When we come to Christ we come as those borne on the shoulders of others, as those carried there through all history by prophets, apostles, teachers, mothers, pastors, friends and the whole host of that anonymous fellowship whose little faith combines to nudge us that much closer to the place of mercy. If we ever get to Christ at all, - you and I with our original ideas, our independent views and our right of private judgment - we get there as those who are deposited at his feet by that ongoing human chain. And unless we acknowledge that we shall never hear the gracious word that heals.

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Now there is more to this episode. But further developments require further sermons. I would stop the story right here where the four men complete their work. I have said that we see in them the ingenuity of love and the insistence of faith. I think we can see something else too: in them we see the practical meaning of the Church.

For this is the Church, I think, the Church in action, this company of ordinary people who possess what Elton Trueblood calls "the courage to care." These are not men for whom religion is a self-centered refuge from life. For

them God is not just "a shelter from the stormy blast," nor is faith a sort of padded cell for the distracted spirit. These men are not afraid to expose themselves to the shock of the world's misery. Nor are they timid about risking both their necks and their reputations in order to bring man's need and God's mercy together. It is this kind of man Christ summoned to himself; for he was himself this kind of man. This is the Church, I think, this demolition crew that strips away the barriers between us and our Lord.

We never hear of these four men again. So far as history is concerned they pass from anonymity into oblivion. No one has preserved their homes as tourist attractions. They are like the people described in the book of Ecclesiasticus.

"And there are some who have no memorial, who have perished as though they had not lived; they have become as though they had not been born, and so have their children after them."

Most of the roof openers have come and gone like that. Last summer when I returned for the centennial of my first parish, I thought of Jennie Bliss. Age-wise she had fifty-five years on me; in spiritual maturity, a million. When she died not many of the town fathers appeared for the funeral. Morris Hopefinger, the funeral director, and I, drove two hundred miles each way to bury her body in the family plot in a home town she had not seen for many years. No one was there to greet us but a grave-digger.

"There used to be some Blisses over t'other side of town," he said, and having established that connection, he took off his hat.

But Jennie Bliss, the retired photographer and amateur artist who taught the Congregational ladies Bible class since the foundations of the world, who alone was able to handle the obstreperous Methodists in the ecumenical group from which I withdrew in despair, who every Sunday without exception walked to church from her home, staggering through the snow with her cane, her hearing aid sending out high shrieks into the Sabbath peace, - she was a channel of grace. She made openings through the roof.

The roof openers, unmemorialized, unsung. They are the church in action, they are the people who show us the ingenuity of love and the insistence of faith, who continually go out of their way to carry the rest of us into the presence.

"And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him, they removed the roof above him; and when they had made an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.'"

O Thou, who hast surrounded us with so great a cloud of witnesses, whose goodness and mercy is mediated in all generations through the faith and courage of those who went before us and those who go with us, help us to make openings for one another, that all the world may know Thee and him who was thy compassion alive among us, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.