

"QUESORITO"

June 24, 2018

Mark 2:1-12

After a few days, Jesus returned to Capernaum, and word got around that he was back home. A crowd gathered, jamming the entrance so no one could get in or out. He was teaching the Word. They brought a paraplegic to him, carried by four men. When they weren't able to get in because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic on his stretcher. Impressed by their bold belief, Jesus said to the paraplegic, "Son, I forgive your sins."

Some religion scholars sitting there started whispering among themselves, "He can't talk that way! That's blasphemy! God and only God can forgive sins."

Jesus knew right away what they were thinking, and said, "Why are you so skeptical? Which is simpler: to say to the paraplegic, 'I forgive your sins,' or say, 'Get up, take your stretcher, and start walking'? Well, just so it's clear that I'm the Son of Man and authorized to do either, or both . . ." (he looked now at the paraplegic), "Get up. Pick up your stretcher and go home." And the man did it—got up, grabbed his stretcher, and walked out, with everyone there watching him. They rubbed their eyes, incredulous—and then praised God, saying, "We've never seen anything like this!"

Saturday last week, I picked up a stranger at the airport. Well, not a perfect stranger—I knew what he looked like and I knew what I was looking for in his clothing and his luggage. Oh, and I knew something of his public heart. But to me, we were strangers.

Do you know how freeing it is to meet an almost complete stranger and be able to put on for them any face you want?

I remember going off to college in Massachusetts and feeling so exhilarated to introduce myself as I wished to be rather than how I often saw myself. That bad breakup with my boyfriend my senior year of high school just before Prom-- suddenly wiped off the history books. *GONE*.

All the times I had made a fool of myself in class because I didn't do the homework, or I couldn't remember how to correctly conjugate the French verb—*GONE*.

All the habits I told myself I would lose from early years now that I was going off to college, like not picking my clothes up off the floor, or eating junk food, or waiting to the last possible second to do my class reading, all those could be *GONE*, too.

Nobody knew me—I had a clean slate. I could draw the perfect picture of *Me* that I wanted to present to my peers, and they would never know about the "before" *Me*, the flawed person that had been formed body and mind and story for the past 17 years. There was much of the old *Me* that I felt I could jettison in favor of the new one I wanted and needed to create going forward.

Of course, it doesn't work that way. The primal *Us* always manages to creep back in and take over. But it's fun sometimes, isn't it, to be a

complete stranger to another and enjoy the brief opportunity for a personality and historical makeover?

A paraplegic on a stretcher was lowered through the roof to the shock and dismay of all those who had gathered with Jesus. He couldn't be carried by his friends through the door. The crowds were crushing into and blocking the small opening, anxious to see Jesus, who was teaching inside. So *naturally* (naturally?) the guys carrying their friend to Jesus just removed part of the roof of the house and lowered him into the room on a stretcher! It makes perfect sense, right? Why didn't I think of that?

Jesus was impressed by this feat! I'll bet he was saying to himself, "Hey, I've seen a lot of things these last couple of years, but I haven't seen this one! This takes the cake. Got to give these guys bonus points for their creativity!"

If only we knew that a clever ploy that gets us eye-to-eye with God guarantees that we can presto-chango be healed of our infirmities! We could have saved a *lot* of time and wear on our knees, a whole lot of promises "if you'll only do this *one* thing for me," and a whole lot of time listening to sermons and singing songs and passing the plate. Sure! Just lower yourself through the roof, Dummy! That's all it takes to get God's attention!

Wow. These Bible stories crack me up sometimes, and sometimes they just make my head hurt with overthinking them.

Then Jesus tells the man, a stranger, "Your sins are forgiven." How did he know that is what the stranger needed to hear just then? We presume he was lowered into the room to have his frozen limbs released, but that's neither what Jesus initially supposes or does for him. He tells him, in essence, "You are no longer away from God." The word "sin" in Greek, *hamartia*, means, "separated, set apart, a stranger, missing the mark." It does not mean acting badly as we have come to judge be judged by the word in our English language.

This is kind of ironic, since in the story, the paralytic man is lowered from a hole in the roof directly onto the mark—directly in front of Jesus! Talk about a literal healing! When Jesus tells him, "Son, I forgive your sins," he is restoring him, *sponsoring* him if you will, back into community. He is no longer an outcast. *That is the healing of the story.* Now the man can speak his own name and be known by that rather than by his *label*.

We talked about this very thing just last week ago, Christ's teaching that people should be known by their heart and not by the convenient labels we put on others. I mentioned the habit many of us have of labeling people instead of naming them. As examples, I threw out, "that guy in the yarmulke" and "that woman married to a black man," just to name two.

Well, we all do it, don't we? I have permission to tell this story: Just last Sunday after worship, someone here who heard Bobby Jo Valentine sing our Anthem and Offertory original songs came up to me and lamented, "Gee, if I had known he was gay, I would have been at the concert last night!" Well.... I purposely did not advertise Bobby Jo as gay, because I hired him to come here not because of that label, but because of the power and honesty of the songs he sent me to listen to. Today I would say he is a very talented, warm-hearted singer-songwriter-- who happens to be gay.

You see, when me talked over a Quesorito a week ago, we had the freedom to describe ourselves to one another any way we wanted. I could have led with being a minister. He could have led with being gay. I could have led with being married to Chris. He could have led with writing songs for people to hear.

I'm pretty sure we talked about baseball vs. basketball—I love the former, he loves the latter. We talked about Denver as we drove through it and California as he had just flown in from it. We talked about singers and songs and sermons that tell stories and how the power of story, sung or spoken, saved both our lives. And we loved the food—the South Restaurant in Englewood's Quesorito to be exact.

We laughed. And we got to know each other just a little bit, finding each other very easy to talk to. What a glorious afternoon it was, and what a glorious evening it was too on our church patio -- there

was a nice, cool breeze, no rain, plenty of delicious food, a nicely drawn map of where everything should go and how to set everything up, and a great variety of music played and danced to by our very own DJ. I have no doubt that the Spirit of God was in this place. It was magical.

When Bobby Jo sang and told some of his story, we were drawn into it and into him, remembering our own stories of loves found and lost, the coming of age into who we were meant to be, the heartache that comes from rejection, and the courage that comes from having to stand tall and tell our truth. For him, he told us this moment came when he stood in front of his very conservative Baptist parents and told them he is gay.

Then, and only then, did he tell us that tale. When we were no longer strangers, Bobby Jo trusted us with his story. When the paralytic man was lowered through the roof right into the face of Jesus, Jesus was forced to recognize him. Jesus accepted him and restored him to community even though he was different, even though he had a different story to tell, even though others besides his friends knew him only by his label, not by his name.

If you were here Saturday night with the other 60 or so of us, you got to know Bobby Jo by his smile, his music, and his songs. What difference, having heard him, did it make that he was gay? Would you have come knowing that? Would you have stayed away? I related to his songs and I'm not gay. We had a mixed crowd here, but we were

first and foremost, a united church family. Everyone heard Bobby Jo through their own filters, their own life stories. That's the point of song, isn't it? Either way, if you had come because he is gay or if you would have stayed away for the same reason, you would have missed Mark's point, the meaning of the story of the man lowered through the roof down to the eye level of Jesus so as to be restored to wholeness.

Here's the twist you may not have picked up on the first time through the gospel story. The man is actually *healed* twice in the story, and the order of the two healings is no mistake. First, the man is healed from his *otherness*; when Jesus "forgives his sins," he brings him back into ritual cleanliness.

It is *this* healing that upsets the Pharisees, not the healing of his physical malady. That is the *second* healing told in the story, the lesser one. First you get your spirit right, *then* you get the body right. The Pharisees said the man was unclean because of his infirmity, "unclean" meaning not welcome in their presence or in the Temple, meaning set apart from God, a pariah. They were upset over the violation of the purity laws, not because Jesus had set someone free of their discriminatory label.

Our film tonight is "The Great Debaters," starring and directed by Denzel Washington, with equally great actor Forrest Whitaker playing a poignant role as a conservative preacher in the Jim Crow Texas south

in 1935. The story, produced by Oprah Winfrey, is a story about being freed from the labels inherent in black-white racism. It's about how a special group of young black American college students force the white elite of their day to regard them for their talent, their brains, and their ambition rather than for the color of their skin. It is about how courage displayed in varied ways can triumph over cowardice, prejudice, and the human diminishment of *God's* command to love one another.

I hope many of you join me tonight in watching this amazing true story, and I hope you bring your teenagers, too. They need to see what used to be, what still *is* in some places and in some hearts, and what could be if we train ourselves to stop thinking and speaking and hating in labels.

Last Saturday, a stranger got into my car with a couple of cases and a guitar. Sunday, as he alighted from my vehicle in Lafayette where I had driven him after church, he left my car as a friend. And I like to think that Jesus smiled.

May It Be So.