

Helping The Hurting

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on June 24, 2018

Luke 5:17-25

17 One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting near by (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. 18 Just then some men came, carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; 19 but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. 20 When he saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." 21 Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, "Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" 22 When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? 24 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the one who was paralyzed—"I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home." 25 Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.

Corporal Casualty was lying seriously injured on the battlefield of life. Many well intended soldiers tried to help him out but were discouraged because they were not experiencing much success. Private Pep Talk was the first to arrive on the scene. He delivered one rousing motivational message. He told him, "Believe in yourself, dig deep, think positive, mind over matter, you can do it Corporal Casualty, you can make your way back to safety!" Following on his footsteps, Lieutenant Logic gave a sterling analysis of the situation outlining all the benefits of returning to safety and all the perils of remaining on the battlefield. Unfortunately, neither Private Pep Talk's motivational message or Lieutenant Logic's educational presentation produced their desired result and so they walked away disappointed.

Major Therapy was the next to show up. He listened with exemplary empathy and affirmed the legitimacy of Corporal Casualty's pain. The Padre came along side and said a prayer for Corporal Casualty and asked God to help him. Then, both the Major and the Padre, thinking they had done their job got up and left.

Sergeant Solution upon seeing the need figured a little old fashioned discipline would fix the problem. He barked some clear orders. "Corporal Casualty, stop bleeding. Get up on those broken legs of yours and report to the field hospital immediately." When his orders did not produce any action, Sergeant Solution stormed off in a rage.

Finally, Corporal Common Sense and a few of his buddies from the Field Ambulance arrived. The applied first aid, put Corporal Casualty on a stretcher, and carried him off to safety.

In our day to day lives, we all encounter hurting people. No matter where we look: in our homes, in our communities, at church, at work, and in our world, we are surrounded by suffering. Faced with this suffering the empathic part of our humanity longs to help, and often time we do. Sometimes

with success. Other times it seems like our efforts didn't make much of a difference.

Like Corporal Casualty's friends, we often find ourselves overwhelmed by the presence of suffering around us and we leave the battlefield discouraged at our inability to make the positive contribution we hoped we could deliver. This leads us to ask, "is there a better way?" Is there a simple solution, like the kind delivered by Corporal Common Sense and his buddies from the Field Ambulance?

In today's Scripture reading we encountered the story of a suffering man; a paralytic. This was a man, who due to his condition, would not be able to hold down a job. He would not be able to provide for himself or for a family. He would not be able to get around without the help of others, and even then, his options were limited. In a day and age when life was already very hard, not being able to use your legs was a huge blow to one's prospects in life.

And if that weren't enough, this suffering man would have had to bear the burden of others thinking his disability was God's judgement upon him. Now, if that sounds strange, let me explain.

In Jesus' day, people believed that God rewarded virtue and punished sin. Thus, if you did good things, you were assured the blessings of God. No harm could come upon you. Likewise, if you did bad things, you were assured the wrath of God. According to the principle of retributive justice, there was no way you could do something wrong and get away with it. No matter how secret your sin, God would get you for it.

In a similar vein, the common belief was that rewards and punishments were handed out according to merit. Thus, in the culture of the day, they believed that a righteous person would be rewarded by God with incredible blessings in life. On the other hand, in the culture of the day, they believed that God would punish a wicked person severely.

Thus, the assumption in those days was that healthy, attractive, and successful people must be righteous because God is just and rewards the righteous. On the other hand people commonly assumed in those days that people who were sick, unattractive, and poor must be the greatest of sinners because God is just and punishes the wicked.

As an example, consider the story of the man born blind, whom Jesus healed. In this story, the commonly held understanding of retributive justice is demonstrated clearly. In that story, when Jesus encountered the man born blind, the first question his disciples asked him was, "who sinned, this man or his parents?" In the book of Job, most of the debating that happens between Job and his three friends is rooted in this theological understanding.

Thus, in the story about the paralytic man, which we read about this morning, he had two big strikes against him. First, he couldn't use his legs, which left him with few options in life. And secondly, he had to endure the shame of others thinking that his suffering was all his fault. It was a large burden to bear.

Fortunately, for the paralytic, he had some good friends. These were the kind of friends we would

all hope to have if we were really in a pinch. These were the kind of friends who were generous, offering to carry their friend to the house where Jesus was staying. They were unflappable, not being deterred when they saw that Jesus was in the house, and the house was full, and there was a large crowd surrounding the house seemingly making it impossible to get to Jesus.

Not a problem, though. In short order, they found a way on the roof. A bold move. And then, they tore a hole in the roof. Now that takes courage. For at this point, they have really crossed the line. Now, they have inflicted significant damage to someone else's home. There will be a price to pay for this action. But, they willingly go ahead and do it anyway believing that the good that will happen will make it all worth while.

Seeing their boldness, Jesus commends the paralytic and his friends for their faith. Turning to the paralytic Jesus says, "your sins are forgiven." Not the response he was hoping for. The Pharisees who were present were also not pleased with Jesus' words.

"This is blasphemy," they thought to themselves. "Only God can forgive sins." And this is true, but, what the Pharisees failed to comprehend is that Jesus was God. In St. Luke's orderly account of the story of Jesus, he makes sure the reader does not miss this critical point. As a result, he begins in chapter one of his gospel with the words of the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary who told her that her son, Jesus, will be the Son of God. Chapter one of Luke's gospel ends with the Spirit filled words of Zechariah, who declares that his son, John, will prepare the way for Jesus, by spreading the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of sin.

This is what the ministry of John, was all about, and this is what the ministry of Jesus was all about. And this is the key point that is made in today's Scripture lesson. At the end of the day, whatever needs we think are unmet in our lives, and that we spend our lives hoping to have met, these are not our real needs. We have only one need. And that one real need is the forgiveness of sins.

As Luke tells us, this is why Jesus came into the world. This is why Jesus died on a cross. This is why Jesus ministered to the paralytic in today's story. So that he, and so that we, may find forgiveness for our sins.

This is what Jesus is up to in our lives. And like the story of the paralytic, the ways that Jesus draws us to himself so that we may find forgiveness for our sins can be very unusual. For example, a friend of mine from my seminary days was telling me his life story. In his teen years he was heading down the wrong path and his life was a mess.

However, things started to turn around for him when he began going to church. Now he did not start attending church because he realized his life was a mess and that he needed help. He didn't come to church because all of a sudden he had a new found interest in God or religion. No, he started coming to church in an effort to pick up a girl that he liked.

To make a long story short, he never got the girl. But as a result of coming to the feet of Jesus on a weekly basis, he received something much better: a relationship with Jesus Christ, the forgiveness

of his sins, and over time, healing from the habits that were ruining his life.

This is important to note. For in the beginning he thought he needed a pretty girl, but, through her witness, God revealed to him his true need, which was met through Jesus Christ. This is how God used her to bring healing to a hurting person in her school.

And this is how God uses us to be of service to those who are hurting. This is how God uses us to serve the Corporal Casualties that we encounter in life. By pointing broken people to Jesus so that Jesus can give them what is needed for their lives. As a testimony to this truth, let me close with one final story.

Guy Doud did not like school much. He did not do very well. He was extremely overweight. Kids picked on him. He felt like a nobody. Guy's biggest goal in life was to drop out of school as quickly as possible. Guy had given up on his life. However, some of his teachers had not. They encouraged him. They spent countless hours after school helping him. They helped him discover some things that he was good at and encouraged him to develop his gifts. Through all this activity, one of his teachers led him to Jesus. And his life was changed.

As a result, Guy completed highschool. He even went on to college. Afterwards, he became a teacher. He later went on to win the teacher of the year award for the United States of America.

In his role as a teacher, Mr. Doud encountered many students in his class who were broken and had given up on their lives. He understood the burdens that these students carried and why they were not fired up to learn the finer points of English grammar.

While it would have been easy to give up on these unmotivated students, giving up was not an option. And so Mr. Doud diligently demonstrated the same care for his students that had been modeled to him by his teachers. In addition to this, he began everyday, before class, by finding the desks of the needy students in his class and he sat down in their desks and prayed for each one of them.

By doing these things, Mr. Doud was looking to bring his students to Jesus, hoping that their lives would be transformed by Jesus just like his life had been. This was his strategy for helping the hurting in his circle of influence. And this is the best strategy we can employ as we seek to help those around us who are in need.

With this in mind, may God help us, like the paralytic's friends, to reach out to those around us who are crippled by life, and may we carry them to the feet of Jesus, in faith, believing that God will meet their true needs, that God will forgive their sins, and that God will bring healing and wholeness to their lives.