WHATEVER IT TAKES

Mark 2:1-12

I invite you to open your Bible to Mark 2:1-12. Several weeks ago we hopped on a ’67 Volkswagon van and started our Summer of Love tour. We spent a few Sundays in the wide open spaces of God’s love for us. Last week we filled up with gas at 1967 prices—33¢ a gallon—and headed for the more intimate confines of our love for others. For the most part in this section of The Summer of Love we’ll be unpacking several of the “one another” statements in the New Testament. Last week we did a little digging around Jesus’ call for us to “love one another.” Jesus expects us to show love to our brothers and sisters in Christ. But Jesus also expects us to love those who haven’t yet come to Christ. Certainly, when we are treating these people with patience and kindness and perseverance and humility and civility, we are loving them well. But if that’s as far as our love goes, we are not loving them well enough.

The best way we can love those outside of Jesus is to get them to Jesus however we can. Our love encourages; His love saves. Our love helps; His love transforms. Our love can make their life a little better in this world; Jesus’ love opens the door for them to live forever in the world to come. Mark tells a story in his gospel about some men who decided to do whatever it takes to get their friend to Jesus. Hear the word of the Lord ... (read the text).

I

Mark sets this miracle early in the ministry of Jesus but not so early that Jesus is some unknown on the scene. He’s already called some disciples and done a few miracles. He had healed one man with leprosy and this former leper was so amazed and so grateful that he started blabbing about Jesus to everyone he met. And one would tell another and then she would tell another until Jesus started getting more attention in His day than Beyoncé and LeBron get in ours. People wanted to see Him. People wanted to hear Him. And sick people craved His healing touch.

Maybe that’s why when Jesus went back to Capernaum he returned to a standing-room-only crowd at Peter’s house. It was wall-to-wall people on the inside and an overflow crowd on the outside too. Even with a shoehorn you couldn’t squeeze in a midget if you tried. It was jam-packed—people pressing
against one another. Feel the body heat, smell the sweat. We’re talking a big crowd in a small place.

Houses like this weren’t made for crowds like that. If it was Peter’s house, and many scholars think it was, then it was a working man’s house. It wasn’t some sprawling five or six thousand square-foot mansion you see from a boat ride on Lake Hamilton. It was more like one of those little houses you see in some of the older parts of town—kind of square in shape and not a lot of square-feet in size. It was made of clay and had a set of steps along the side to access the roof. They built steps there so families could escape the heat of the day by reclining on the rooftop in the evenings when temperatures started to cool. It was a typical working man’s house for its day.

And it was packed tighter than a hippo in skinny jeans. Inside the house with Jesus were the big shots—some of the teachers of the law—Pharisee types—who wanted to hear this Jesus for themselves. Was He the real deal or was He a heretic? They wanted to know. And because they were big shots they got the best seats. Otherwise, it was every man for himself—just squeeze in wherever you could. And they squeezed in all right—to the point that even the door was blocked with this mass of humanity and if anybody showed up late, well, good luck finding a place to stand and see and hear.

But sure enough, five latecomers arrive—four men and their paralyzed friend. They’re carrying him on a makeshift stretcher—each one manning a corner, toting their friend down the road, trying to stay in step with one another. It must have been a bumpy ride for the paralyzed man, and for all we know, he was trying to get them to stop and take him home. But they are determined to get their friend to Jesus, and can you hear the air go out of them as they turn the corner and see the crowd that beat them there?

They stop in their tracks. “Oh, no. What are we going to do now?” says one. The paralytic strains to raise his head and see what’s going on, and when he sees the crowd he drops his head back into the stretcher and says, “I told you this was a waste of time. Now take me home.”

“There’s got to be a way,” said another of the friends. “We’re not going to carry you this far and turn back now. There’s got to be a way.”
“Maybe they’ll let us through,” said another. “It’s worth a try.” And they made their way, each step a little heavier and a little harder than the one before.

They made it to the edge of the crowd: “Excuse us, please. Coming through! Coming through!”

“You’re not coming through here,” said a man leaning on his cane. “Yeah,” said a blind man, “you’ll have to wait in line like the rest of us.”

II

Well, that didn’t work out so well. So they stepped back from the edge of the crowd and set their paralyzed friend on the ground while they rubbed their aching backs and considered their options. The paralytic speaks up, “We’ll never get through that crowd. We’ll never get to Jesus.” And then one of his friends says, “Now don’t give up just yet; there’s got to be another way.” Then one, who had stepped aside to get a better view of the situation said, “I’ve got an idea—the steps. Let’s use the steps. If we can get him up to the roof we can drop him right down at the feet of Jesus.”

“Are you crazy?” one piped up. “Have you lost your mind? We could get in a lot of trouble for that, you know—tearing up people’s houses. In case you hadn’t heard, they call that vandalism.”

But the man was committed to his idea: “Well I’m not coming this far to give up. If we can get him through the roof, we’ll pool our money together and fix it when we’re done. I’m telling you, it’s the only way.”

Overhearing the conversation, the paralytic rolls his eyes and says, “Would you guys just take me home … please?”

His friends ignore him. “Let’s go for it,” they said. And they did. They pushed through the crowd, stepping on a few toes, shoving a few people aside and made it to the steps. People were sitting on the first two or three steps, but they were clear after that. So up to the roof they went. And it wasn’t easy. You ever tried to carry a makeshift stretcher up a set of stairs? How about a couch or a dresser? It’s not easy to keep the load your carrying balanced. The two guys on the higher steps had to keep their end of the stretcher lower, and
the two guys on the lower steps had to hold their end of the stretcher higher. And the paralytic, who already felt like he was something of a spectacle by virtue of his condition, closed his eyes in embarrassment and prayed they wouldn’t drop him or that he wouldn’t roll off the stretcher and over the edge.

Huffing and puffing, they made it to the top. A couple of them were wiping their sweaty brows, another was shaking out his arms. And one put his ear to the roof to pinpoint as best he could the voice of Jesus. “Right here,” he announced. They started digging. And it wasn’t all that hard. A couple of them had their pocket knives. They would only have to break up the clay coating, dig out the brushwood and branches beneath, and stuff their paralytic friend, mat and all through the three-foot space between beams. And that’s what they did, lowering him hand over hand until he was at the feet of Jesus.

It got the attention of everyone inside the house—first the digging noise, then the falling clay and brush, people dodging as best they could in that crowded space, then the bright beam of light, highlighting the dust and silhouetting the form of the paralytic on his mat coming down. Every eye was looking at the ceiling. Every eye followed the man down while three or four below reached up to catch him and steady his decline all the way to the floor. And then every eye, including Jesus, looked up at the four grinning faces peering down through that hole in the roof.

III

And when Jesus saw them, was He ever impressed by their faith. One commentator points out that “Mark measures faith not by its orthodoxy but by its determination, courage, and persistence.” These four friends surely demonstrated those qualities and impressed Jesus with their faith. So Jesus looked down at the paralyzed man, and without hesitation said, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Huh? I’ve got wonder if that statement didn’t shock more than the teachers of the law in the crowd. It must have been a shock to those friends on the roof: “Your sins are forgiven? We didn’t come all this way, drag him all this

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1I’m indebted for the architectural details to Virginia Stem Owens, Looking for Jesus (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 41.
far, lug him up here to the top of this house, tear up a patch of a stranger’s roof, and drop him down to your feet, Jesus, to get his sins forgiven. We brought him to get his body healed. So what’s with this ‘your sins are forgiven’ stuff?”

You can’t blame them if they felt that way. How would you like it if you fell off a ladder, broke your leg, experienced great pain, were rolled into the emergency room, and the doctor walked in and said, “Your sins are forgiven; now send him home”? My guess is you’d rather he just fix your leg. And you wouldn’t feel any better if you went to the pharmacy to pick up your antibiotic and instead of giving you your medicine the pharmacist said, “Your sins are forgiven; now go on home and you’ll be fine.” Jesus’ words of forgiveness must have been a real puzzler to the paralytic’s friends.

And those words angered the teachers of the law. They didn’t speak up, but as if they had one of those cartoon speech bubbles coming out of their heads, Jesus could read their thoughts: “Who does this blasphemer think he is? Only God can forgive sins.”

So Jesus took their challenge and asked them a question: “Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’?” That’s not such a hard question, is it? It’s probably easier to say “Your sins are forgiven” because who will ever really know if the man’s sins are forgiven or not? But if Jesus says, “Get up and walk,” well, we’ll know immediately whether Jesus is a fraud or the real deal.

So Jesus decides to say both those things. And He does it to prove to these teachers of the law that He is the Son of Man and that He has the authority to do the God-like act of forgiving sins. Then, having forgiven the paralytic’s sins, Jesus tells him to get up, take his mat, and go home. And guess what—this twisted, pretzel of a man straightened up like a soldier at attention, grabbed his mat, and marched right out of the place in full view of everyone there. And the same crowd who wouldn’t make a way for him to get in the house when he was paralyzed made a clear path for him as he walked out the door.

Meanwhile, his four pals on the roof are high-fiving one another, shaking their heads in amazement, and laughing out loud at the healing of their friend.

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3I’m grateful for the “cartoon bubble” image to Rob Lacey, The Word on the Street (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 273.
and the power of this Nazarene named Jesus. And at least one of them muttering under his breath, “Thank God we don’t have to carry him home.”

IV

This is a great story, and there are any number of ways we could get at it. We’re going to get at it by taking a lesson from the four men in the story who did whatever it took to get their friend to Jesus.

These men are an example of taking love of others to the next level. They could have been passive. They could have decided, “If our paralyzed friend wants to meet Jesus, let him figure out how to do that for himself.” The men could have decided, “It’s too much effort to get him to Jesus, maybe Jesus will someday come to him.” They could have decided, “If we try to get him to Jesus, he might get mad at us and it might hurt our friendship, so let’s just leave it alone.” Or they might have reasoned, “In this world some people walk and others are paralyzed. Maybe he’s supposed to just stay that way.” Those four men could have made any of those deductions, remained good friends of the paralytic, and treated him with sympathy and love. But they took love to the next level.

They did whatever it took to get him to Jesus. They recognized Jesus was the only one who could help him. They weren’t shy about enlisting the help of others in getting him to Jesus. They exercised persistent faith, not giving up till they got their friend to Jesus. And they overcame every obstacle that stood in the way—pushing through discouragement, pressing through the crowd, looking for alternative ways when the direct route was unavailable, risking their treasure and the good will of others by tearing a hole in a stranger’s roof. They were bold and creative and unashamed and overcame every obstacle to get their friend to Jesus. They took love of those who need Christ to the next level.

V

And that’s exactly what motivates the recasting of vision for the church and the changes we’re incorporating in September as we add a second Sunday School and different worship formats. We want to reach more of Hot Springs for Christ. We want to take our love of those in Hot
Springs who don’t know Christ to the next level—to a level beyond the status quo; a level beyond, “They know where we are, they can come anytime they want”; a level beyond “We’re comfortable the way we are, why risk fixing something that’s not broken and maybe screw the whole thing up?” We’re not being defensive with these changes. We’re not trying to rescue ourselves or shore up a crumbling house. We’re on the offensive. We’re trying to take ground away from the enemy and for the kingdom of God.

Our changes involve risk. We’re risking our comfort and our convenience. We’re risking upsetting an apple cart that appears to be rolling along steadily and smoothly. But as we talked about in the vision meetings, we have 19 of our 26 adult Sunday School departments at 80% or more of capacity. And while we add members regularly, we don’t see that reflected in our average attendance. And most of the people we add are already Christians. We need a second Sunday School. We need it to add space without adding debt. And we need it because new classes typically reach more people than established classes. New classes typically are more geared to reach those who don’t know Christ or attend a Bible study. We need to open another Sunday School door for the church. Historically, we have reached more people and experienced more growth when we open new doors to Christ and the church. And a second Sunday School enables us not just to reach more people but to invest in them in small group Bible study that provides support, prayer, encouragement, answers to questions, and opportunities to minister and to be ministered to in personal ways.

A second Sunday School is a new door, and so is the offering of different worship formats. Did you know that worship is the front door of the church—the first place many experience Christ in the church? Neither Lee nor I ever thought we’d want to offer anything but identical worship services in a two service format. But while I was in Namibia, helping lead a conference about reaching the city, God impressed on me how important it is to speak a language that people can relate to, how important it is to do whatever it takes. And while Lee was in Ukraine God began to speak to his heart along the same lines. So when we both got back and visited, we realized God must be in this. The last time I had this kind of experience was when I came back from Nicaragua in 2005 with a burden to enlarge our mission-ministry but knowing I couldn’t do it alone. That very week John Wayne Smith came to see me and told me that God had laid it on his heart to organize and lead the development of full-blown mission-ministry for the church. And God has certainly blessed
that—first with John Wayne and then with Ken Wheatley. I believe God will do that in this re-visioning of our Sunday School and worship.

We’ll be offering a more classic worship service and a more celebration worship service. We believe this change will help us reach all the generations in our community for Christ. The worship theme will be the same. The sermon will be the same. The purpose will be the same. The preparation and effort in leadership will be the same. The atmosphere and musical stylings will be the biggest difference. But we will opening new doors to people in our community—people you know who don’t know Christ but who might visit a service that speaks a language they can better understand.

These changes will be a challenge. Getting enough new leaders will be a challenge for a second Sunday School and a different worship styles. Parking will be a challenge. Asking you to tweak your own Sunday schedules and preferences will be a challenge as well. The feedback you’ve given us raises important concerns about these challenges.

- Some are concerned that families that worship together now may worship in different services in the new format.
- Others are concerned that since Sunday School and worship are offered twice simultaneously, once they choose an option, they’re kind of stuck. And to change worship means they change Sunday School too.
- Some are concerned that this could have a hurtful impact the wonderful unity we enjoy.

I understand those concerns. I’m sympathetic to them. As we talked about in our vision and feedback meetings, this is not a perfect schedule. We may well have to tweak the schedule after two or three months or experiencing it. But it’s important that we risk our discomfort for the sake of people who don’t know Jesus. It’s important that we do whatever helps us grab a corner of a stretcher and do whatever it takes to get those people to Christ. And while we enjoy the comfort and peace our unity affords, we believe at its heart our unity is rooted less around our comfort and more around Christ and His mission in our world.

We’ll learn more about these things as we go, and we’ll change as God leads and needs dictate. But we won’t learn anything by waiting. The time is
now. People are more geared to embrace new things at the beginning of a school year than they are on January 1. We've been docked in the harbor long enough. Let’s pull the lines and sail this ship out into the open sea where we have to lean more on God and more on His Spirit-wind to take us to the new places He wants us to go. And it’s in those open seas that we can throw lifelines to folks who are drowning and dying and holding one for dear life.

And we’re going to need all hands on deck for this change. We need new teachers and greeters and parking attendants and Sunday School secretaries and outreach directors. We need small groups of people who would be willing to leave the comfort of their current Sunday School class and birth a new class in the other Sunday School hour. And we need more evangelists and disciplers and mentors. We’ll be training people for these things.

The vision is larger than adding a Sunday School and tweaking worship formats. The vision is summarized like this: Invite everyone — Invest in people — Impact eternity. This is a large vision—a great commandment, great commission vision.

So we need everyone to grab a corner of a stretcher, take your love for those who don’t know Christ to the next level, and do whatever it takes to get them to Jesus. And you won’t have to bring them through the roof because we’re opening new doors and making new space for them all. Don’t you want to be a part of something larger than yourself? Don’t you want to get on board with a vision that invites everyone, invests in people, and impacts eternity?

It’s going to be exciting and scary and risky to make such changes but we believe God is in it and some of our most effective, faith-building, people-reaching days are ahead of us.

VI

Near the end of the question and comment time in one of our vision casting/feedback sessions, one of our senior adult ladies said something to this effect: “While I like things the way they are, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get people to Jesus.”

Are you? Our community is filled with people who are paralyzed—paralyzed by fear, by confusion, by sin, by addiction, by poverty, and maybe a
hundred other things. It’s time we enlist a friend or two, grab a corner of their stretcher and do whatever it takes to get them to Jesus. And as we go get them, we’ll provide space and worship in a language they can understand. We want them to find an open door, an exalted Christ, the gospel preached, and the opportunity to be forgiven, saved, healed, and empowered to be set free to impact eternity for the glory of God.

Come September, we’re going to take that to a new level, and we need your hand on the stretcher to help us do whatever it takes to get them to Jesus. Are you in?

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