

First Congregational Church of Wakefield, United Church of Christ
The Rev. John Tamilio III, Senior Pastor
Sunday, 23 February 2003: Seventh Sunday After Epiphany

Sermon: "Unprecedented Grace" (Mark 2:1-12)

The church, in general, is one of those institutions that does not like change. "We have always done it this way," you often hear people say in committee meetings, whether those meetings take place in fellowship halls or parking lots. I am not referring to our church, mind you. I mean churches, in general, dislike change. Now this is both good and bad. *Why is it good?* People deal with all kinds of pressures and responsibilities. Life is often unstable, uncertain, and unreliable. People like to come to a place where they know that everything is going to be constant, secure, and solid. This is, after all, a sanctuary. *Why is it bad?* The Gospel confronts us with a powerful message: a message that should both challenge and transform us upon hearing it. *Change can be good and change can be bad.* It depends on the situation. The interesting thing is that this phenomenon is not confined to the church. Be at work or at home or in any given social arena: change usually creates stress in people's lives. Things were no different in Jesus' day.

On a number of occasions — just two weeks ago even — I mentioned that Jesus was a revolutionary. He challenged the political and religious powers of his day and that, in many respects, was what led to his crucifixion. Jesus was an agent of change and because of that he was admired and feared, loved and hated. Look at today's Gospel Lesson from Mark: the story of the paralytic whose friends lower him through the roof in order for Jesus to heal him.

There are so many directions that a preacher could take with this passage. Here are just a few. 1. One could preach on the crowd: it is early in Mark's story, but Jesus' popularity has already spread so fast and so far that people came from all over to see him. When it was reported that he was at home in Capernum, "So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door." 2. One could preach on faith: the four friends of the paralytic have so much faith in Jesus' ability to heal that they are going to use any means necessary to be sure that their friend sees him, even if it means digging their way through the roof. 3. One could preach on the scribes who witness this event and are infuriated that Jesus takes it upon himself to do what only God can do: forgive sins. In fact, they accuse him of blasphemy, which in Jesus' day was a capital offense. 4. I came across one commentator this week who said that this story is the perfect text for a sermon on accessibility. Many a disabled person knows how difficult and humiliating it is to make it to the sanctuary in some churches: "having to be carried up the front steps like a child" or finding an alternate route "through the kitchen or utility room before being able to join the 'normal' people who come in the front door."¹ This passage from Mark is filled with a wealth of possibilities. 5. The part that always strikes me, though, is the very last verse. After Jesus heals the paralytic and he departs with his mat, the onlookers "were all amazed" and said, "We have never seen anything like this!" It is an unprecedented event. Never before had something like this happened.

Change. Unprecedented change. No one had seen anything like this before. But this is also a story about grace. Unprecedented grace. No one had witnessed anything like *this* before either.

In an article on the meaning of grace, Harold Sala writes,

The Bible mentions grace some 170 times in 159 different references. While the word is often found in the Old Testament, it was the writers of the New Testament who gave the word meaning.

The Greek word used in the New Testament, *charis*, means, "favor, grace, gracious care or help...an act which one grants to another."

If there is any single word which is distinctly Christian, it is the word GRACE. The whole concept is framed with an undeserved quality — something which we believers have received, which we could never merit —

¹ *The New Student Bible* (NRSV), notes by Philip Yancey and Tim Stafford (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 904.

something which God chose to do simply because He loved us.²

What a perfect definition. Grace is “something which God chose to do simply because He loved us.” There is nothing that we did to earn it and there is nothing that we did to deserve it. It is a gift with no strings attached, given simply out of love: God’s love for us. Rarely does this ever happen in human relationships — and the amazing thing at the end of the story of Jesus healing the paralytic is the crowd’s confession that never before had they seen anything like this.

There is another important part to this story that we sort of glossed over. Jesus heals the paralytic to prove a point — to illustrate the power of God at work in him. As I mentioned last week, the people of Jesus’ day believed that ailments were the result of sin. When Jesus sees the faith of the paralytic’s friends, he says to him, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” It is then that the attending scribes are outraged. “Why does this fellow speak in this way,” they say. “Who can forgive sins but God alone.” To which Jesus responds, “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” — he said to the paralytic — “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” Jesus has the power to forgive and the power to heal. Both acts are unprecedented. In the eyes of the scribes, this is something that only God can do.

Unprecedented grace. Jesus does this for the paralyzed man — and he does this for us as well.

Last week, you may remember, I spoke about how we are a broken creation. *We are!* In body, mind, and spirit, we are broken. What accentuates our brokenness even more is our inability to do anything about it and our futility when we try to. We cannot fix ourselves. We cannot be the creatures that we long to be. In spite of all that, God breaks into our lives in unprecedented ways to do the impossible. This is the beauty of faith. The assurance and the comfort of knowing that God is present in our lives to fill our emptiness with love, to make our brokenness whole, to transform our grief into rejoicing, to remind us that we do not traverse this road alone.

And this is unprecedented. No one in our lives has the ability to provide us with such fulfillment. This is not to suggest that the relationships we have with our loved ones — our lovers, friends, and relatives — are not strong, love-filled, life-giving relationships. In fact, I believe that one of the ways that we experience the love of God in our lives is through the love we share with others and, indeed, there are people in our lives whom we feel complete us. What I mean here is that the unconditional, grace-filled, healing, and transforming love that we receive in Christ is unlike any other. It loves us in spite of our faults and foibles. It sees through our dark side, the underbelly of our soul, and embraces us just the same.

I said, a moment ago, that this love comes with no strings attached. This is only partially true. We receive this grace unconditionally, but once we receive it we have to respond. We cannot ignore such an earth-shattering gift. We are to respond with faith: by dedicating our lives to Christ and to serve his church with all of our heart, with all of our soul, and with all of our might. Being passive recipients is not enough. Being sideline Christians doesn’t cut it. We must conform every aspect of our lives to God and God’s will for us.

And so, my friends, having received, you must give. Having heard, you must tell. Having seen, you must show. Such unprecedented grace must not be hid; it must be allowed to shine so that all the world may see its light. “We have never seen anything like this!” the people said. And neither have we. May we help others who live in darkness see this great light as well. Amen.

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² Harold Sala from Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations* (Dallas: Bible Communications, Inc., 1998), 1074.