

## HEALING A PARALYTIC

*(Mark 2:1-13)*

Mark's story of the healing of the paralytic recounts Jesus' action of healing and forgiveness in response to paralysis and radical skepticism. The narrative invites listeners to celebrate both the determined faith of the paralytic and his friends and the joy of his newfound strength to walk. It also welcomes listeners' skepticism about Jesus' authority to act as God who forgives and makes new. The implicit appeal is to have confidence in Jesus as the agent of God's grace and power. The sign of such confidence is an all-out exploration of the possibility of getting up and walking away from whatever cripples us.

### Learning the Story with a Group

The best way to get people involved in telling stories is to lead a group through the stages of learning and telling a story. This process leads people through the steps of learning a story, exploring its meaning then and now, and telling it first within and then outside the group. This way of forming oral tradition communities can be done with any group, either all at once or in stages.

Two elements of preparation are essential for the leader. The first is to know the story well. The second is to have copies of the story typed in episodes for every person.

Learning a story with a group is great fun. And the best introduction to learning a biblical story is for people to get physically and emotionally involved as a group in some kind of fun. The essential component is give and take, action and response. A "lion hunt" has become my most frequent starting point, especially with large groups. In a lion hunt, the group says and does everything that the leader says and does, in immediate response. The lion hunt always has the same basic structure. But infinite variations are possible for each particular occasion. The gestures are big and boisterous and can only be learned by doing them. Most camp leaders and kindergarten teachers can initiate you into this august oral tradition. This is an outline:

Hi.

Do you want to go on a lion hunt? Let's go!

Open the door. Shut the door. Open the gate. Shut the gate.

Uh oh! Forgot my gun. Gotta go back.

[Repeat door and gate]

Pick up the gun.

Kiss my spouse.

[Repeat door and gate]

Let's go! Great day.

Grass. Medium grass. Tall grass. Low grass. No grass.

Let's climb a tree. Look to the left. Look to the right.

Does anybody see a lion? Nope. Let's go.

Un oh! A river. Big river. Gotta cross.

Does anybody see a bridge? [If so, cross and come to another river later.]

Nope. Better get a big run. On your marks, get set, GO!

Oops! Really big river. I'm scared. Crocodiles.

Better get a really big run. On your marks, get set, GO! Into the river! Swim! Beat off those crocodiles! Swim! We made it. Way to go!  
Mud. Deep mud. Blurp, blurp. Medium mud. Squish, squish. No mud.  
Let's climb another tree. Look to the left. Look to the right.  
Does anybody see a lion? Nope. But there's a cave over there. Let's go look. Down the tree.  
Shh! We're getting close to the cave. And here it is. Big, dark cave. It's really dark in there.  
There's lion tracks goin' in. And there's lion tracks coming out.  
There's human tracks goin' in. But there ain't no human tracks coming out.  
I'm scared. You go first. No, you go first. YOU GO! Oh, all right, let's go together.  
Shhh!  
Sure is dark in here. Does anybody see a lion? Nope. I feel something . . . fuzzy.  
There's one big yellow eye. There's two big yellow eyes.  
IT'S A LION! RUN!  
Up the tree. Down the tree. Through the mud. Into the river. Up the tree. Down the tree. Through the grass. Open the gate. Shut the gate. Open the door. Shut the door.  
Put up my gun. Kiss my spouse. We made it.  
We're home. Way to go! [Clapping]

And, if the group is learning the healing of the paralytic, after the applause and laughter dies down, go through exactly the same process with Mark's story. The biblical story needs the same energy in its words and gestures. Keep the word groups fairly short. The group says the story back to you with the gestures.

I would suggest that you imagine yourself with a group and tell the story back to a leader with total abandon and big gestures. The more verbal and physical energy you can generate, the better.

### *The Story*

And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.

And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room for them, not even about the door.

And he was preaching the word to them.

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

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.

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak like this?

It is blasphemy!

Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they were questioning within themselves, said to them, "Why do you question like this in your hearts? What is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk'? But 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, rise, take up your pallet and go home."

And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all. So they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this."

After going through the story, analyze its structure. Charting the episodes on a blackboard or flip-chart is helpful. The group can suggest a range of possible episode titles. In addition to naming the episodes, you might also label the sentences and identify the subjects or key words in each sentence. Keep the instructions brief and simple. Every word said is a further interference with the group's short-term memory.

Next, repeat the story again, asking the group to associate the words with the structure on the chart. Keep the gestures going so that all three perceptual systems-aural, visual, kinesthetic-are operative.

Hand out the story in episodes and explain that after the next round of repetition, each person will tell the story to a partner. This is a typical introduction:

After I tell it to you and we go through it together again, I'm going to ask you to turn immediately and tell it to your partner. The goal will be to get through the story. If you get lost, your partner will help you. Partners, don't look at the paper. This paper is dangerous stuff. It can either be a helper for fledgling storytellers or the primary enemy. This paper is only an aid to your memory. Don't depend on it. DON'T LOOK AT IT! Use your memory. Therefore, while your partners are telling the story, remember along with them. Listen. If they get lost, just pick them up at that point. If neither one of you can remember, then you look and refresh your partner's memory.

Take these fifteen minutes to tell the story back and forth as often as you can. Work toward getting through it with as high a degree of mastery and comfort as possible. Don't talk about it. We have spent years learning how to talk about these stories and almost no time learning how to tell them. Concentrate on the story. If anyone needs help, I'm available.

Our goal is for everyone to be able to get through the story from beginning to end.

After going over the story together once more and perhaps having the leader retell it, the group works on telling the story in groups of two.

It is sometimes helpful to give a group five or ten minutes to work on it individually before telling it to a partner. This has come to be known as the "blab school" method. Everyone tells or reads the story out loud to themselves at the same time. If you include this step, the following instructions may be helpful:

There are some basic rules about this time. First, find your own space. Then tell the story to yourself in a loud voice. Everyone else is going to be telling it too. You'll be fine as long as you tell it loud enough that you can't hear everyone else. But if you are timid and quiet, other people will bother you. Therefore, talk loudly, and you'll be okay. This is going to be organized chaos. Enjoy it! After a few minutes, when I give the signal, find a partner and tell it to each other.

The leader can circulate during this time of one-to-one storytelling and help people who are having difficulties. Many people have difficult emotional and intellectual problems related to storytelling that they need to work through. Some people are sure they can't memorize, or had a traumatic experience with memorization as a child. Others have major reservations about memorizing Bible stories. Others are concerned that they won't remember the story word for word and will get it wrong. However, while a brief discussion may help, it is best not to let people escape into talking about the story rather than telling it. The intellectuals in the group often have the highest degree of resistance. And most of these discussions are avoidance tactics. After a period of ten to fifteen minutes, depending on the length of the story, call the group back. A brief period of feedback is always helpful. The main task is to celebrate the group's achievement.

### Learning the Story

#### *Verbal Threads*

**"Your sins are forgiven."** This phrase is the climax of the healing episode and of the scribes' questions, and is picked up in Jesus' question, "What is easier...?" (vss. 5, 9).

**"Questioning in their hearts."** This phrase sets the scene for the scribes' questions and Jesus' response (vss. 6, 8). There is a minor variation in the introduction to Jesus' response, "questioning within themselves."

**"Rise, take up your pallet."** This is the link between Jesus' question to the scribes and his command to the paralytic (vss. 9, 11). The phrase ends first with "and walk," next with "and go home." The thread also ties Jesus' question to the fulfillment of his command: "And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet [same verbs, different tense in Greek] and went out before them all" (vs. 12).

These verbal threads are typical of the way in which two or three contiguous episodes are woven together. The most frequent connections are (1) the last sentence of one episode and the first of the next, (2) the first and last sentence of the same episode, and (3) the first or last sentences of subsequent episodes.

#### *Scenes*

This story can be visualized as a shooting script for a movie:

**Scene 1.** Pan shot on the village with the word going out that he's home and people crowding into the house; end with shot through the door to Jesus preaching.

**Scene 2.** Shot from roof of four coming to the house, going up the steps to the roof, and tearing a hole in the roof; change to shot from floor of the house up to paralytic coming down through the roof and faces of the four; close-up of Jesus and paralytic.

**Scene 3.** Pan over to scribes sitting on the side; focus in on them talking to each other.

**Scene 4.** Wide shot of Jesus and the scribes, then close-up of Jesus talking to the paralytic.

**Scene 5.** Close-up of paralytic getting up; pan back steadily to paralytic walking out, to whole crowd as they respond, and to village again as Jesus and crowd move out to the sea.

*Thoughts, Emotions, Actions*

The thought of this account focuses on the complex issue of Jesus' authority to forgive sins. The implication of the event is that Jesus is uniquely related to God and to the rest of humanity.

The emotions of the story begin and end with the enthusiasm of the crowd and its attraction to Jesus. The paralytic episode is the most emotionally complex. It moves from the determination of the four, to the surprise and good humor of the roof removal, to Jesus' compassion in response to the paralytic. The emotions of the scribe episode and of Jesus' responses can be variously angry, probing, or satirical, depending on your interpretation.

The story's action connects radical questioning and skepticism with forgiveness, healing, and liberation. It leads the audience into a relationship with the paralytic and his friends and with the scribes as they encounter Jesus. And it calls for a response of joining the crowd in its amazement. The action moves from relaxation/enthusiasm to compassion/tension to expansive release. The effect of the story could be called a catharsis of pity, resignation, and skepticism.

### Listening to the Story

The biggest problem in listening to this story in its original context is to discern over the two intervening millennia how Mark presented the dialogue between Jesus and the scribes.

The original context of this story can be clarified by understanding its history as a narrative tradition. Form criticism is a method for the study of biblical narratives in the period of oral formation prior to their being written down. The method involves a detailed comparison of stories with a similar form or structure. These stories are analyzed as a group to determine their typical form and function in oral tradition. The presupposition of this method is that oral traditions are formed and circulated in accordance with patterns or laws of oral transmission. By clarifying the forms or types of stories and sayings in the Synoptic tradition, it is then possible to distinguish the earlier oral forms of a tradition from the later forms in which editing has taken place.

A form-critical analysis of this story is interesting. A typical healing story is composed of a setting and description of the illness, an action that brings the illness to Jesus, a word or action by Jesus, a description of the healing, and a response by the one healed and/or by onlookers. The conflict story is a separate form with its own typical elements. This story is then an unusual combination of the elements of a healing story and the elements of a conflict story.

An examination of Mark's narrative also reveals two clear seams between the earlier and later forms of the narrative. The most readily apparent seam is the highly unusual sentence that ends Jesus' speech to the scribes: "But in order that you may know that the Son of man has authority to forgive sins on earth—he says to the paralytic, I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go to your house" (literally translated). This sentence is a grammatical nightmare. The first half is a conditional clause addressed to the scribes. In one sense, the

sentence is never finished. In mid-sentence, the subject shifts to the paralytic and a new independent clause is introduced. The sentence makes oral sense but only in a somewhat awkward manner. This grammatical incongruity may indicate a seam where two pieces of tradition have been sewn together.

There is evidence of another earlier seam. The subject of the piece that has been sewn in is the dispute between Jesus and the scribes. That piece begins at verse 7, immediately after Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness. The scribes are somewhat abruptly introduced at this point. There is no mention of scribes in the initial setting of the scene (2:1-2). Assuming that Luke's version of this story (Luke 5:17-26) is later than Mark's, Luke dealt with this problem by making the scribes and Pharisees the main characters in the opening setting and introducing the crowd in the midst of the narrative:

On one of those days, as he was teaching, there were Pharisees and teachers of the law sitting by, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem; and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. (Luke 5: 17)

Thus, the narrative patch in Mark's narrative begins with the introduction of the scribes (2:6) and ends with the address to the paralytic (2:10b). The earlier form of Mark's story would then have been as follows:

And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven. And I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home." And he rose and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!"

Since this account has the typical form of a healing story—setting, action to bring sickness to Jesus' attention, action/word by Jesus, healing, response—the probability is high that it was an earlier form of the paralytic tradition.

This analysis enables us to see the fascinating way in which the story grew in the telling. The history of the paralytic tradition may also provide some clues about the most serious problem in the telling of this story, namely, how did Mark intend for the scribes' episode to be told? Generally, when this narrative is read aloud today, the scribes are presented as bad guys and the attitude of the reader is distinctly critical. The attitude of the narrator toward the characters of the story is a primary factor in shaping the emotional distance between the listeners and those characters. If the storyteller's attitude toward the scribes is cynical and cutting, the appeal to the listeners will be to separate themselves from the scribes and to regard their questions negatively. The question is whether Mark told the story that way himself and, by implication, intended that we should tell it that way as well.

The tradition history of the paralytic story raises the same question in another form: why did Mark (or a pre-Markan storyteller) add the conflict with the scribes to the story? A thematic reason was to introduce the motif of Jesus' authority to forgive sins. A storytelling answer emerges in telling the story in its earlier form.

Jesus' statement, "Your sins are forgiven," is a radical surprise in the context of first-century Judaism. Not even the high priest had the authority to make such a pronouncement. If Jewish listeners to the original form of the story were shocked by this statement, they may have either stopped listening or have been so offended that they walked away. By including the scribes, who were authorities on such issues, in the story, Mark gave voice to his listeners' questions and wove their response into the story.

If this was the case, Mark presented the words of the scribes sympathetically so that the audience could identify with them. The scribes spoke for them. As a result, when Mark reported Jesus' words in response to the scribes, he spoke directly to the audience as if they

were the scribes. In effect, at that moment in the story, the listeners were the scribes, listening to Jesus' response to their questions.

As you will see and hear in telling these stories, the impact of biblical narrative depends on this kind of identification with the characters of the story. When the listeners identify with certain characters, the speeches to those characters in the story are addressed to the listeners. The history of this story, with its addition of conflict with the scribes, is congruent with this pattern in the biblical storytelling tradition.

It is easy to see in this context why the attitude of the storyteller now is so important. Contemporary Christian listeners are generally predisposed to be critical of Jews in general and, particularly, of scribes and Pharisees. The history of Christian interpretation of the Gospels has created this predisposition. If there is even the slightest hint of criticism in the storyteller's voice, that will control the audience's attitude. Only if the storyteller presents the scribes' words in a highly sympathetic manner will a contemporary Christian audience identify at all with the scribes and thereby hear the story appropriately. On the other hand, if the story is told with a negative attitude, the effect of the story will be radically changed. It will be experienced as another in a seemingly endless series of human stories in which the effect is to point the finger of ridicule and blame at someone else.

Therefore, Mark probably presented Jesus' words to the scribes in a sympathetic rather than a critical manner. Likewise, as I hear Mark's telling of this story, the tone of Jesus' words was not hate or disdain but respect and a desire for engagement. Just as Jesus entered into dialogue with the scribes, Mark enters into dialogue with his listeners and asks their questions. I do not see Mark pointing his finger at the audience when Jesus says "But that you may know that the Son of man has authority ... " but rather opening his hands or touching the side of his head. It is less a confrontation than an invitation.

There was healing and forgiveness in this tale for Mark's listeners, in their identification with the paralytic and with the scribes. This corresponds with the sympathetic dynamics of the story. The first appeal of the story is to identify with the paralytic and his friends in the radicality of their determination to get to Jesus. This identification is the sandwich for the appeal to identify with the scribes in their skepticism. At the conclusion of the story, the implication is that all of them – the crowd and the scribes – glorified God.

Another less complex issue in listening to Mark's story is the report about the roof. How did Mark tell the roof business? (2:4). How big a deal was the hole in the roof? While there is evidence that the mud and stick roofs of ancient Palestine were sometimes opened to let down food, Mark presents it as a radical action. Matthew doesn't even mention the roof. But this is typical of Matthew's extremely concise style in the healing stories. The evidence that Mark made a big deal of the hole in the roof is the number of words he spends on its description. In effect, he describes it twice: "they removed the roof/"when they had made an opening." However, the Revised Standard Version is a wimpish translation of Mark's Greek. The first phrase literally means "to unroof the roof" while the second verb means "to tear out," here in reference to the mud and sticks of the roof. Often this verb (*eksoruksantes* in Greek) is used to describe tearing out someone's eyes (for examples, see *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Bauer, Gingrich, and Danker 1979, 277). It is a violent word for which "made an opening" is a weak and inept rendering. Thus, Mark probably told this episode in a highly vivid and emphatic manner.

"My son, your sins are forgiven" (vs. 5)-this statement is performative language, similar in its impact and tone to the words declaring a man and woman to be husband and wife. Just as the words "I pronounce you husband and wife" do something significant, so also these words do something. They are words which, by their being spoken, cause something to

happen. The story focuses down from the high volume and intensity of the tearing open of the roof to these authoritative words of Jesus to the paralytic.

### Connections

This story invites us to identify with the paralytic and his friends. In all the healing stories, the audience is invited to sympathize with the one who is afflicted. In this account, the primary focus is on the determination of the friends and the paralytic to get to Jesus.

The story thus invites us to identify our own experiences of being paralyzed and taking radical steps to get help. And, in order to tell the story sympathetically, it is necessary to make that connection. Therefore, a step in learning this story is to remember and perhaps tell to yourself or someone else experiences of paralysis and searching for help. When have you been paralyzed by powers beyond your control and asked for help?

As we have seen, the story also invites us to identify with the scribes in their questioning of Jesus and of the possibility that the paralytic can be forgiven. The dynamics of the story require that the storyteller both understand and sympathize with the scribes in their questioning. Who is the scribe in you?

The field of experience that the story addresses is that of defending the rules and customs that have authority in our families and communities. The scribe defends the ways in which things "ought" to be done. While it is important to maintain the specific relationship to the issues addressed in this story, the scribes also represent a type or an attitude that is widely present. Religious people who are threatened by violations of their social and religious customs can identify with the scribes if they will allow themselves to explore their true feelings. There is also a profound skepticism implicit in their questions. Thus, a step in exploring this story is to identify the times when you have felt threatened by the breaking of a social or religious custom or have been radically skeptical about some religious kook's authority. The purpose of this exploration is to find a point of connection with the energy of the scribes' questions.

### Telling the Story

A storytelling process has emerged from this story that has proven to be a powerful way of telling and hearing this story. It is a simple and direct way of sharing the story in relation to our personal needs. And I would suggest that you share the story in this way with a storytelling partner.

Share with your partner the ways in which you most deeply identify with the paralytic and the scribe now. In what ways are you paralyzed, unable to move effectively? And in what ways are you skeptical of the possibility that anyone could forgive you and enable you to walk again?

After you have shared, listen to your partner tell you the story. The purpose in telling the story is not to give counselor spiritual answers, but to share a common faith experience. Telling the story enables us to hear our present experience in the context of Jesus' presence and power. If my partner has shared a present paralysis and skepticism with me, I will respond with the story. And, in the telling, I too will listen for the ways Christ may be present for my friend in this story.

After hearing the story, it is often good to talk about what, if anything, you heard in the story. It may be that you heard nothing and that the story did not connect in any way. And that is perfectly acceptable. Telling these stories does not do something more or less



automatically. The stories are words that have the potential to set our experience in the context of the presence of Christ. But if you did hear something that connected with your life, then share and explore it with your partner. Often the stories are meaningful in ways we never could have anticipated.

This process is one of many storytelling possibilities that are available to us. In the aftermath of the accident I mentioned earlier, I was in casts for six months and then unable to walk without a cane for well over a year. There was initially a serious question whether I would be able to walk again. During that period, this story became my story.

I began telling it to myself during the physical therapy in the hospital when I took my first steps between parallel bars: two steps the first day, four the next. But the most frequent tellings were during the months of physical therapy at home. When a knee is immobilized for a long period of time, adhesions grow over the joint. In order to get flexibility back, those adhesions must be broken. The easiest way is to push the joint as hard as you can, gradually breaking them. My task was then to sit and push as hard as I could as long as I could on that joint. After I couldn't stand the pain anymore, I could rest for a few hours before doing the same process again. This went on for months with only small signs of progress.

I told myself this story time after time during this period. Sometimes it was a story of hope. I would envision myself getting up and walking again. Often it was a story of forgiveness: forgiveness for my sins of avoiding or not doing my exercises which alone would enable me to walk again, for my shame at being unable to walk when I had been a runner and a first-rate tennis player, and for my anger at God for not being able to run and play with Tom and Michael, who were then eight and four. It was also a story which gave me a context for exploring my skepticism about ever being able to walk again and about God's ability to enable me to do that. All of my critical and cynical energies as a scholar found expression in the scribes' questions.

Day by day in a variety of ways, I told myself this story and remembered it in exquisite detail. Writing in my journal, prayer, and doing my exercises all became occasions for remembering this story. And in an equally varied number of ways, the story enabled me to recognize and accept Jesus' presence and power.

In the process of remembering this story, Jesus Christ became present for me. Through the story, he welcomed me into the midst of the community in my broken condition, argued with me about the theological issues involved in this stupid accident, and steadily called on me to get up and walk. The return of my strength and energy was a steady gift that was profoundly connected with this story. In some sense, remembering the story enabled me to walk again. For this reason, I would recommend that you open yourself to receiving the unique gifts of this story when you are in stress, pain, or crisis.