

UP ON THE ROOF

Kathy Kipp

Someone asked me this week why I chose this passage. As I was thinking of Back to School, I was reflecting back on my earliest memories of grade school...first grade in the Catholic school I attended in Northern Germany...memories of the nuns who looked like penguins and pulled my ear because I talked too much in class...the fun of learning cursive writing with my new fountain pen...learning to spell in German where everything was phonetic and like a fun puzzle. We had lesson books where we wrote out what we learned and drew pictures to go along with them. The lesson I had in my religion book that I can remember and vividly recall is this story. I can still see the little drawing I made with my blue fountain pen of the stick-figure paralytic on what looked like a platter, being lowered down with ropes by his four stick-figure friends kneeling on the roof.

Beneath my little drawing was the scripture written out in my cursive German writing:

Markus 2

*Da aber Jesus ihren Glauben sah,
sprach er zu dem Gichtbrüchigen:
Mein Sohn, deine Sünden sind dir vergeben...*

We lived in Germany because my father was the international hatchery manager for DeKalb in Europe. My mom was struck by lightning once when my dad was traveling. After that, she was nervous to stay alone out in the middle of nowhere with my sister and me when my dad was out of town. She would pack us up on those nights and we would stay with the Zerhusens at their farm. It was absolutely beautiful, and my best childhood memories are there. Onkel Hermann and Tante Inga were my second parents. Ludgar, Annetta, Ansgar and Christina were my four best friends. I would sleep in Annetta's room underneath a giant feather bed. It was bitter cold in the winters...we could see our breath when we woke up in the mornings and I could hardly stand to get out from under the hot covers.

But early morning, it was time to do chores. Their barn was an extension of their home. The hay loft in the top of the barn was where we would start our mornings. A giant hole looked down onto the barn

floor where we would throw the hay down to feed the cows. We would toss down an enormous pile and then daringly jump down over 20 feet right in the middle of it. Jumping was the scariest thing for me, as I was just a little girl (it would almost paralyze me) but with these four friends beside me, and Onkel Hermann (who could do everything, in my eyes) down below, I knew I could do it. We then fed the cows and helped Onkel Hermann milk them. When all our chores were done, Tante Inga was waiting with breakfast in the kitchen that was in the next room over from the cows...my favorite meal of fresh brodchen with cheese and cold cuts and sometimes Nutella, and always with a glass of the fresh warm milk that we had just milked ourselves from the cows. Somehow I saw this story in Mark taking place right here through that hole in the ceiling of that barn. These four friends were some of the best friends I have ever had. I know that is where this story did take place for me. I was completely loved and completely adored and accepted even though I was a foreigner. There was no love to earn...just love, joy and laughter to share. Somehow there was always room at their house and in their hearts for us no matter what.

Last week, I got a call from a very excited and darling 13-year-old girl who introduced herself as Laura, Ansgar's daughter. She asked if I might make a surprise call to Ansgar for his 50th birthday on Friday night at 9pm when she knew he would be home. Well, that was actually 5AM in Germany on Saturday morning. Ansgar was so surprised and happy and delighted to hear from me. Pure love and acceptance. Some things never change.

Okay, so back to our scripture passage in Mark. A little background leading up to this event early in Jesus' ministry: Mark begins with John the Baptist appearing in the wilderness proclaiming *a baptism...* a new life of real freedom...repentance and forgiveness of sins (loaded words). Everyone is flocking to him from the countryside of Judea and the city of Jerusalem. A movement is going on.

John's message is a wake-up call to Judaism...the Judaism that told again and again the story of freedom but had no idea what freedom would look like when it came. John the Baptist is the original "free" spirit...in his rough coat of camel's hair, eating his locusts and wild honey. He is telling the people to get ready for the greatest moment in Jewish history...as a matter of fact, it ended up being the greatest moment in world history.

Someone is coming. Are they ready?

Mark wants us to sense the shock of this new thing that God is doing. Mark has a way of putting us right in the middle of his stories. They raise the questions for us too: Where are we paralyzed and asleep today, in our churches, our communities, our personal lives? What might it take to wake us up?

Then...John baptizes Jesus. As Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens break open and the Spirit descends on him, like a dove. And a voice comes from heaven: *"You are my beloved Son. In you I take delight"*...the greatest, most amazing wake-up call. And God says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us not as ourselves, but as who we are in Jesus Christ...the summing-up of the whole Christian gospel point. This is the gospel story. Then Jesus spends time away to sort it out and gets his calling clear...40 days of prayer and testing. Jesus is strategic, intentional and focused. He is ready. At this time, he has called four disciples...two sets of brothers: Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John the sons of Zebedee. He prays and begins a strategic and well-thought-out journey. Then the show begins...teaching, exorcisms, healings...and despite trying to remain low-key, Jesus attracts growing fame and a following.

Our scripture passage today takes us back to Capernaum, Jesus' home base, where he has gone back for a little R&R, and like a teen heartthrob who is staying at the local hotel, where word has gotten out that he is there, crowds begin gathering.

Jesus is fearless. We are told that he is teaching like one with authority and not like the scribes (the religious elite)...uh oh! And on this day, back in Capernaum, for the first time in Jesus' ministry we are hearing that some scribes are now in the crowd. They have come to check him out. The controversy begins...the great religious leaders of the time, the critics, are on the scene.

Now, a group of friends have heard about Jesus and what he can do. Their friend is paralyzed and they know that Jesus can and will heal him, but the crowd refuses to open up to let the friends and their burden in. The friends are willing to go to any length for their friend. This is the kind of crazy love they share...the kind that makes them fearless. Together they get bold (maybe it was a little bit of mob mentality, but I think they have picked up on Jesus' fearlessness and the message he brings). Somehow they have gotten their friend up on the roof. How did they do it? A little hint...it takes more than one. Picture these guys hoisting their paralyzed friend on his cot up on

the roof. It makes me think of the modern slang phrase “to tear the roof off,” which means “to dominate or take control of a situation”... perhaps it originated from this story. The Greek literally translates to say they “unroofed the roof.” These men took control of the situation in this story. They took off the ceiling of everyone’s understanding that day when they brought their paralyzed friend through the roof.

The Greek verb for “bringing” this friend means to bear or move by bearing...to carry some burden. (Paul says we are called to bear one another’s burdens.) The friends gently lower their friend down into the center of the room. It is these four friends who become the center of Jesus’ attention. What does Jesus see? He sees their faith! How can you see faith? Well, he is not seeing a belief system or agreement with a set of ideas or creeds. He is seeing their “trust.” Trust, commitment and loyalty can be seen in the actions of the four friends. I find it interesting that their “faith” becomes the center of Jesus’ attention in the middle of this crazy scene...trusting that Jesus *could and would* heal their friend. That is what trust, commitment and loyalty look like...not the rules about who is in and who is out that the scribes and religious elite of the time are worrying about.

What Jesus is saying and teaching is literally blowing people’s minds... blowing holes in ceilings of everyone’s understanding. The hole torn in Jesus’ roof is nothing compared to the hole he is tearing in everyone’s comprehension. The craziness and boldness of the four friends is nothing compared to the craziness and boldness in Jesus’ next statement. The next thing we hear in the story is actually the turning point of the whole story: SON. When Jesus calls the man “Son,” he breaks the social barriers that normally isolated disabled persons in that day. If you were disabled, you were viewed as “unclean”... you must have done something to deserve it. But Jesus calls him “SON.” This is actually the real miracle in this story. While the man is still paralyzed, while his sins are still unforgiven, Jesus draws the man back into a full honored place in the village social circle. We expect Jesus to physically heal the man, but next he tells him, “Your sins are forgiven.” The primary meaning of “forgiven” here means “to send away.” What if we used “sent away” instead of “forgiving”? Your sins are sent away! Your sins are no longer with you...they no longer matter. The response comes not from the man but from the scribes who charge Jesus with blasphemy...a capital crime. We expect a miracle, healing a disabled man, and instead get relationships restored, “sending away” sins (where we are missing the mark), and serious controversy regarding Jesus’ authority.

Last week I was sitting in the Hanalei community center in Kauai, a round room with a large round skylight in the ceiling. Doug and Sandy McMaster were giving a slack-key guitar concert and Sandy told this story. It is called “Bowl of Light.” [Start music: “Light of the Soul” by Doug and Sandy McMaster.]

Sandy began by saying: “I felt a resonance deep within when I first learned of the family story from Molokai, passed down by the great-great-great grandmother of Koko Willis, Kaili’ohe Kame’ekua, and preserved by Koko and other elders of the family.

When a woman became pregnant, the family would search for the right piece of wood and start carving a bowl. It was not the perfect piece of wood...it was the right piece of wood. They would work on the carving throughout the pregnancy, and on the day the baby was born they would put all the finishing touches on the bowl. The bowl would be presented to the baby to carry through his or her life, as a reminder to tend their Bowl of Light.

Each child born has, at birth, a Bowl of perfect Light. If they tend their light, it will grow in strength and they can do all things...swim with the sharks, fly with the birds, know and understand all things.

If they become envious or jealous or angry or fearful, they drop a stone into their Bowl of Light and some of the Light goes out. Light and the stone cannot hold the same space. If they continue to put stones in their Bowl of Light, the Light will go out and they will become a stone. A stone does not grow, nor does it move.

If at any time they tire of being a stone, all that is needed is to turn the Bowl upside down and the stones will fall away and the Light will grow once more.

In the old Hawaiian culture, it was believed that when your soul comes into your body, it comes in through the heart. And your heart is the connection to all things...to the Source. It is the connection to the Source of love that is all around us, and our connection to everyone and everything. It is of most importance to “tend your Bowl of Light,” keeping the heart pure and open to allow the Aloha spirit to enter and be expressed through you.

Ha’ale’ale i ka Pu’uwai – heart filled to the brim and overflowing with Aloha.

SON. You are my beloved son. In you I take delight. You are a bowl of perfect light. Your sins ARE forgiven...they already are. "Repent" has nothing to do with punishment. It means turn your bowl over... a stone cannot move. You are forgiven. Turn your bowl over. You are filled with light...you can move.

People were having incredible responses to the slack-key guitar music. It was truly healing. It triggered my mind thinking about this story. I imagined the friends bringing the paralyzed man through the roof into this room of healing music that was so full of peace, love and beauty. I was thinking maybe the four friends were the four disciples Jesus had called; they "get it"...bringing a paralyzed religion before Jesus and the scribes. Jesus knows the way to heal the man...bring him into community...love and acceptance...instruct him to walk again...to be whole...then tell him it's time to go home...to connect with God.

I would like to share a little bit of what I see as the landscape for young people today. And while this overview might be focused on our youth, the insights and trends are applicable to adults as well.

The "nones" are the fastest growing religious group today. This is "nones" as in N-O-N-E-S, meaning when you ask them a question about their religious affiliation, they say "none." This does NOT mean they do not believe in God, or do not love God, or do not pray, or are not spiritual. It means they have no religious affiliation...perhaps for many reasons, but the obvious one that seems to scream out is because they see limited to no value or benefit to having a religious affiliation. So they don't.

They don't hear our message. They hear the Christian message the media portrays, which is not the Christian understanding we share. They hear judgment..."repent" has something to do with judgment and punishment, not turning their bowls over. Sins are bad things... more judgment, not "missing the connection with God." Then when they enter in, they are not feeling it in their heart. The heart is made to love and be loved. You cannot deal with spiritual things in a courtroom manner.

I have been active in Princeton Seminary's Institute for Youth Ministry. They have done a lot of studies on millennials and religion. One study from Pew Research was entitled: ***Want to get millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to be "cool."***

That is not what millennials are looking for. What they are looking for is a “purpose,” a “cause,” a reason to be “part of,” and if there are no discernable and articulated reasons...and they have to be reasons that make sense...they will not be part of something “just because.”

Christianity at its core is about relationships. We are called to follow God as a loving community. But what happens when this community becomes irrelevant and insular, with ideas and a language that young people cannot understand or hear? In the hills of the Burgundy region of France, there is a monastic community called Taize. It has become one of the modern world’s most important sites of Christian pilgrimage. Each year hundreds of thousands of young people from around the world make pilgrimages there for prayer, Bible study, sharing and communal work. What speaks to these young people is the spirit of kindness, simplicity and reconciliation...connecting and experiencing the love of Christ. Brother Alois puts it this way: “The exchange with God becomes real for us in prayer; by his Holy Spirit, God comes to dwell within us. In return we can surrender everything to him.” The young people who visit feel the complete love of God: you are my dear, dear child...in you I am well pleased.

Some of the Brothers were at last year’s Princeton Forum for youth ministry. We were able to experience a Taize service with the Brothers and the community at Princeton. The simple music speaks to our young people. It speaks to their souls...sometimes with Latin words they don’t understand with their heads but with their hearts. I would love for you to be able to experience a little Taize moment. I am going to play a song called Ubi Caritas. It is 3-1/2 minutes long. I invite you to allow the music to flow over you and through you. If you want to sing along, you can.

Here are the words in Latin and the English translation:

Ubi caritas et amor
Ubi caritas, Deus ibi est

Where charity and love abide...true charity...
true and noble love...magnificent and holy love...
God is dwelling there...God is dwelling there.

I invite you in to see what bubbles up for you. Where have you experienced love...God’s love...God with you...this week?

End Song: *Ubi Caritas*

Confirmation Announcement:

Loving relationships are what God calls us to. Part of our Confirmation program is to connect each young person with a mentor, someone to be in loving relationship with them as they begin this spiritual journey. When every hero begins their spiritual journey, God sends the helpers. Moses had Aaron, Snow White had the seven dwarves, and Harry Potter had the house elves. As a mentor you don't have to have all the right answers, you just need to have a loving heart. Confirmation is the affirmation of their baptism...the pure love...receiving that love. If you are hearing that call to enter into this kind of relationship, let me know. I will let you in on a little secret. The mentors probably get more out of this process than the youth, at least until the youth are older and can appreciate more fully the blessing the mentors have had in their lives.