

Calvary United Methodist Church
December 8, 2019

WE HAVE SEEN REMARKABLE THINGS

Rev. Dr. Stephen Gallaher, Guest Preacher

Children's Message:

I'd like to invite my young friends to come on up if we have any kiddos here in the congregation. A little bit closer, we may be pretty full. So, come up and have a seat here in the front row. You are going to be sitting beside my grandson, one of my grandsons. We have five grandsons and one granddaughter.

Okay, so I brought my friends from the Barnyard Bunch with me today and there are two expectations today. Number One: You have to watch carefully and Number Two: Listen closely. What do you think, can you pull that off? Can you watch carefully and listen closely? Is that a deal? If that's a deal, on the count of three, I am going to ask you to say "Yes." One, two, three. (Yes!) That was pretty decent, but there are five of you and would you have said it that way at home? Let's say it like you are super excited at home. How would you say that? One, two, three. (YES!) Here we go!

(Puppet show.)

Okay, so, the dog, you don't think you would want him as a pet? I think he has to have some attitude adjustment before we would want him to be a pet, right? Okay.

We are going to thank God for the day in prayers and this is what we do when we pray: We bow our heads and close our eyes so we aren't distracted with what is around us. And basically we are just talking to the Lord. So, let's pray.

Lord, thanks a lot for this time, day. Thank you for every kid who is a part of this congregation. Thank you, Lord, for our folks and our grandparents, those who care for us, provide for us, love us, share life dreams with us, Lord. We are so grateful for the food and the nice clothes and the homes we live in, Jesus. In your name we pray. And you kids all agree saying...how do we close a prayer? Amen.

Gospel Lesson:

If you have a Bible with you, you may want to follow along. I am going to begin reading with Luke 5:17. I want to share with you something. One of the courses I teach at Messiah College is Pastoral Theology and Congregational Dynamics and one of the things that we have learned through the research around congregations in an ecumenical sense is that there are four primary factors that draw people into our faith communities. Number one within Protestantism is preaching, the practical application of the Word of God. Number two and three, because they

are so close, is the children and youth ministry emphasis of the congregation and the music ministry of the congregation. And the fourth is the hospitality the congregation extends to those who are entering within their gates and joining together with others in worship. I just want to tell you that your music ministry in this congregation is fantastic, so thank you so much, you blessed my soul with what you do. It's so inspiring, so thank you very much. And the hospitality, oh my! I don't know how anybody can get into this sanctuary without being greeted by several, unless they slip in somehow unbeknownst to others because it is so well covered. My grandson and I were walking in today with a ton of stuff and the door was opened for us, we were warmly greeted, people saying: hello, hello, hello, nice to see you...as I am carrying the puppet stage in and just so many wonderful aspects. I was sharing with my family after being with you in October, I really like Calvary United Methodist Church. I am very grateful for the opportunity of sharing with the people of faith here in the congregation.

So, from Luke 5, this story. This is actually the very passage that I shared with you when I was here in October, but like many passages of scripture there are so many different lenses through which we can interpret the truth of God's Word. I was focusing on this passage back in October on the marvelous and remarkable reality of forgiveness and how forgiveness is so essential if there is to be reconciliation. There won't be reconciliation without forgiveness. And not all forgiveness leads to reconciliation, but that would be God's heart and desire that people of faith would be reconciled.

But I share this passage with you again because when you look at this passage of scripture there are some dynamics here that are overshadowed because of the forgiveness emphasis in this passage. Let's take a look at it. Luke 5: 17-26.

Message:

Luke 5:17-26

We ask for our Father's anointing upon this public reading of His Holy Word, and, oh, yes, they saw remarkable things on that day.

We see remarkable things too. Sometimes it is in the realm of the supernatural. You just can't explain it. Like this forgiveness the man received from Jesus that was extended into his healing. The man who had not been able to walk rises, we don't know this, maybe for the first time in his life. Whatever his life-long condition may have been, he's standing up and had not been able to walk and he praises God and does what Jesus said: He goes home. Can you imagine the look on his family's face when he goes home, he walked through the door?

My heart was so warm yesterday. I was returning from the family farm and got home and I pulled up a news server and I saw a video of a little baby that had been born without the ability to hear and doctors and the amazing ability that they have been given by God to correct things that are wrong had some implants that they could put in this baby's ears. And Mom and Dad would turn them off at night and turn them on in the morning and come in and greet

their little one. This baby can't be more than three or four months old, maybe a little older than that. But when the baby hears Mom's voice, the baby just screams with excitement, because he can't hear Mom's voice any other time. Holy cow! This little precious baby is hearing his mom's voice for the first...I'd say that's pretty remarkable.

So, we see and we hear about remarkable things all the time, but I want to talk about the remarkable gift of friendship. Now you were answering even when you weren't supposed to whether or not you have friends and I think maybe you did because friends are very important to us. Right before the Thanksgiving break on campus I asked one of my classes: what will you really say to God I'm thankful for today? Ask any group that and you are going to hear this sentence structure somewhere along the line: I'm thankful to God for my family and friends. Would you agree with that? And like many people in a room who hear that said the first time it is replicated. So not only do you hear that once, you hear that multiple times from people in any setting: Yes, I'm very grateful for my family and friends. And we get the family part. And I realize that that's not everybody's story. As hard as that is at times for some people. But for most people we are very grateful for our family.

But we had the addendum to that sentence: I'm very grateful for my family and my friends. How important friends truly are. Now, I realize that we come at the holiday seasons like this and we plan family gatherings and we put so much into them...by the way your sanctuary is just adorned beautifully. My attention just went right to the beautiful tree. Everything in here reflects something significant and meaningful within the season and obviously Jesus Christ.

But along with our families and celebration with our families, there are our friends. And for some of us we don't get to see our friends as often as we would like. We only get to see them occasionally, but when we do we just light up. You think about it...if you haven't seen a really good friend for a while and you see them, you are just so excited. What caught my attention a while back when I was reading the scripture, it is so easy to focus only on the forgiveness element and the incredible manifestation of healing that we might miss the focus on friendship.

I'd like for you to think about it and just walk back with me in the history a little bit with a little back story on this scripture. So, I am taking some license with the scripture, but I understand human dynamics and relationship and you do too. So, here are these four guys that what they have heard about Jesus we have no idea. We don't know if they have ever met Jesus. We don't know if they literally heard him speak or if they have only heard about Jesus. Remember word about Jesus travelled all throughout Galilean region. They had the belief that if they could get their friend to Jesus, something may change in their friend's life. And so these friends start out on the task of placing their paralyzed friend on a mat and carting him off to where Jesus was speaking. We don't know the distance that that was but what we do know, according to biblical witness, is that when they arrived to where Jesus was speaking the crowd was so sick...I mean it would have been hard for any one of them individually to

get through the crowd, but there are four of them and they have a guy on a mat. How difficult might that be? Think about it.

Well, they realized that they are not going to be able to get through the crowd and you know for most people, in fact most friends that would have been enough. Most friends would have said: You know what? We tried. Because most friends weren't really, to be a little more gracious, some friends stop only with good intentions. And they can celebrate and applaud themselves with their good intentions. And I don't think anybody would have criticized them. But if they had come up against that huge crowd and said: Oh, clearly we can't go any further, sorry, back we go. Maybe another day. Not these friends. True friends press on. And these friends enacted forms of creativity that just caused Jesus to notice.

If you think about it, these four friends realizing, assessing the situation, realizing that they are not going to get through this crowd but for some geographic issue there is a hill like alongside this building that Jesus is speaking in and you know the building is covered with some kind of portico or something, so these guys can get up on this hill, get their friend up on the roof, take tiles off the roof and lower their friend in front of Jesus. Now, you just read that through the biblical witness on just basically summarize what we said. Think about every aspect of that. They go around the crowd with the guy on the mat and they are up on a hill. Are people not now looking? I mean if you were listening to Jesus speak, they could offer you the whole seat, but you would only need the edge, because nobody had ever heard anybody speak like this before. They would have been totally captivated, but now the attention is on Jesus. What are these guys up to? What are these guys pulling? What are these guys doing? And here are these guys with their friend on the mat up on the hill and they are not satisfied with just sitting on the hill so they can look at Jesus and have a better angle. No, they are raising this guy up on the roof. Now how many people are watching or truly listening to Jesus and do you think Jesus is even continuing to teach?

I don't know what kind of roof it is. It says it's tiles of some form or another, but you got four guys and a paralyzed man on top of it, you'd think be big rats up there or something. You'd think Jesus would be looking up and saying: I wonder what these guys are doing? And then to remove the tiles and to drop this man in front of Jesus? Would that have been easy? Let's take a look at it.

Josh, give me that mat, will you? Thank you. I asked him if he would volunteer to be a paralyzed man today. He said he would. He actually reserved the right to sue if this didn't work out. Okay, paralyzed man, please. I am going to go over to teenager section here and I am looking for four teenagers. Don't be like my students in class when I call on them and they look down hoping I won't see them. He's not looking at me! I'm looking for four teenagers to come on up. Yeah, four teens, come on up. I need some teens, guys, girls. I got two, looking for three. I got three, one more. I got four, okay, here we go. We have four. Down, paralyzed man.

So, what I want you to do is first of all each take a corner, if you would and grab it really well so it couldn't possible rip. He is not the lightest paralyzed man. So would you walk the paralyzed man back the sanctuary please. Make an effort, back the sanctuary. How are you feeling paralyzed man? Comfortable? Cramped? How do you think the real guy was feeling? Real guy may have been a little lighter than you are, I don't know. Ok, that's far enough. Bring the paralyzed man back up front would you please? I hope he isn't paralyzed. We may have to have a station of healing until the end of this. Yeah, come on up. So, would you put him up here on the first level, please? Yeah, bring the paralyzed man up to the first level. But when you get him up there don't put him down, take him up to the second level. But don't put him down, take him to the third level. Take the paralyzed level up to the third level. Okay. And gently lay him down. Let's thank you for his four friends. (Applause.)

We went up three steps. We are talking up on a roof. How did they get him up there? I mean think of the coordination these friends had to apply. You gotta...don't let that side down! He's rolling, he's rolling! You got to have it really equal. You gotta get him up there and then when you get him up there that may have been a whole lot easier than getting him down. You take the tiles off and you are lowering him down now in front of Jesus. What kind of drop would that have been? These guys aren't going through the roof, these guys are up above lowering him down. Make sure it is stable and steady! Watch him, watch him, watch it! Would anybody have been listening to Jesus? Would Jesus have really been teaching?

Do you have friends like that? Are you that kind of friend that would not settle only with good intentions? Would you do what is needed for the advantage of someone who is compromised in some way or another? Would you take a risk? Would you be so bold? Even have people looking at you: look at these guys. What do they think they are doing? What are they pulling? Would you risk that for a friend?

In Salt and Light youth ministry we have the even every year we call it Impact. It is a four day about 1000 teenagers come to Camp Green Hills, one of our conference camps. A number of years ago, probably about seven years ago there was a congregation from Williamsport and there was a young man in the congregation whose name was Paul and Paul was acting inappropriately to the females in the youth ministry. So the youth workers really put the hammer down and said: You just cannot be acting that way and we don't want to see you doing that kind of stuff. Paul was offended and I guess this was just adding on to all kinds of other things that were in turmoil in his life. He pens a suicide note and hands it to a kid who brings it to me. I said we are not taking that lightly, obviously. We have professional counselors on the grounds when we hold these events. So I took the note to one of the counselors and we called Paul in and we met with Paul and a counselor conversed with Paul for quite a long period of time and determined that he had boundaries around him but determined that he wasn't necessarily suicidal and he was making that threat to get attention. So, we let him return to the group, the youth workers said: no, this is where you have to be, this is how you

have to conduct yourself.

So, Friday night of the event where we have mainstage stuff and everybody is looking forward to what is going on on the mainstage, I see Paul standing beside the mainstage before the evening event started. So I just walked up to Paul, put my arm around his shoulder and was going to ask him how it's going. He takes his hand, knocked my hand off his shoulder and said: I hate them. I hate them! You hate who? I hate him, I hate these kids, I hate my youth workers, I hate myself. I am going to kill myself and takes off running to the Little Juniata Creek. Now the Little Juniata Creek banks had been swollen because it had rained days and days before the event. And we'd even make announcements from the mainstage: do not go to the Little Juniata Creek. You get into that creek and think you are going to raft and just fool around in the creek, it would take you. Don't do it. He's taking off for the Little Juniata Creek. I take off after him. Thirty yards, out of breath. Security! Security comes flying down off the hill, but this kids a flyer, they can't catch him. He is tackled feet before he throws himself in the Little Juniata by one of his own youth members who was faster than he was.

In the course of this someone had called 911 and when I got there and we were trying to put together what is going on here, here come the State Police and they take hold of him and about an hour later one of the officers approaches me and says: You've got a choice to make. What are we going to do with him? What do you mean, what are we going to do with him? He said: Well, we are either going to take him to JC Blair Memorial Hospital, take him there to the emergency room or we are going to put him in prison for an overnigher. I said you can't take him to prison. Take him to the hospital. He said: Fine, you are going with us. I said: What are you talking about? He said: You are going with us. I said: Why am I going with you? He said: Well, did you receive a suicide note from him? I said: Yes, I did. Then you are going. I said: I have an event to run. The officer looked me right in the face and said: Are you the only one who can run this event? No, no, I'm not the only one that can run the event. Fine! You are going with us. Let's go.

So, we go down to the JC Blair Memorial Hospital and I am not a happy camper. Has anybody ever been to an emergency room? Has anybody ever sat more than ten minutes? You sit more than ten minutes in an emergency room...hours and hours. Nurse comes out and says you can see him now. It's well past midnight and she gave me a little card that had his mom's phone number on it. Well, I'm going to call tomorrow. I didn't know what the number was. His youth pastor had the numbers. I'm at the hospital. I can't... So, and they don't have any cell reception up at Green Hills. So, I call his mom. You know, I never thought I'd experience anything like this from a parent. Introduced myself to his mom and told him mom we have your son here at the hospital and I want you to know he is okay but he's admitted. And here response to me was: I don't care. It caught me off guard. I didn't anticipate that response. I said: Oh, he's going to be in here for 72 hours so the event will then be over. Would you like to make arrangements to come down and connect with your son and take your son home? She said: Nope! I'm not getting him. Well, ma'am how are

we going to get your son back home to Williamsport? That's your problem. You figure it out. Well, would you like to talk to your son? I don't want to talk to my son.

Well, I knew, because he had told me earlier that there were things that were a little rough at home. That solidified it for me. I got it. I knew it. The nurse said: Do you want to go see him? I said: Yes, I do. And honestly, I am going to own this, I was agitated. Spending all that time in the emergency room, totally missed everything that was going on at the main-stage, I walked into his room and his back was go me and when he turned, his eyes were just flushed red, tears down his cheeks and he says to me: I am so sorry I ruined your evening. And it was like the conviction of the Holy Spirit in my soul. My evening? Am I that ridiculously transparent that this is about me? Immediately the conviction of God in my life. This is not about me. It is about a young man who is really struggling and messed up and needs help and support. I just did what I think a dad or anybody in faith would do. I just opened my arms and he came running across that room, fell in my arms. He just bawled and bawled and bawled, soaked my shirt.

Till I got out the room it was after 2 and I drove back to Camp Green Hills and got there about 2:30 and of course no campfire is going, nobody is awake. I pull into my parking spot by the manor and there are four figures coming down off the hill. I didn't recognize them at first, but they got closer I realized they were four of my colleagues and they surrounded me and they wanted to know how I was doing and I said: Guys, what are you doing? And their response was: Waiting for you. I had been gone for like six hours. Waiting for you. The event ended at 10. They were on the hill for four and a half hours. I said: You had no idea when I was going to return. They said: It wouldn't matter. We were praying and waiting for you to get back. And we are going to pray for you now. And these guys surrounded me and I had already undergone the conviction of the Holy Spirit because of my attitude with this young man and they prayed over me and I just lost it because I saw the evidence of God's love in these four colleagues who are my deep friends. And I was so blessed to have this kind of friends. I did not walk back into the manor alone. I walked back in there with four friends that God knew to just sooth my soul and move me into some forgiveness so I could sleep. I thank God for that. You probably thank God for friends too.

So when I see at the end of this passage we have seen remarkable things today, yes, I get it. The forgiveness extended to this man, the healing of the paralyzed man. I think we saw a remarkable evidence of true friendship with four guys stop with good intentions that creatively found a way to press in and press on and to fulfill the task.

The final thing I want to say about this is: Just like the star of Bethlehem, once those four friends bring that paralyzed man to Jesus, you never read another thing about them. We don't even know who they were. Because it's not about the four friends. It's about what those four friends did to bring their friend to Jesus. That's the type of friends I want to have. That's the type of friend I want to be. You? Amen.