

“Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days . . .” As we delve into this remarkable incident in Mark 2, come with me for a few moments into the world of the subsistence farmer, the rural poor in Galilee, at the time of the ministry of Jesus.

The Romans were, of course, in charge, the majority party! Their Legions strode across the region, imposing their will as a foreign power, a ruthless invader. Under occupation things were tense and unpredictable, violent and viscous. There was money to be had in the nasty business of collaboration with the occupying power. The Benedict Arnold’s of the day made themselves valuable to the Romans, and snatched at any opportunity to line their own pockets as they helped carry out the will of Caesar.

There was for sure too much government, too much regulation and legislation, too many people to be paid off – the power structure was strangling the economy and, as ever, the poor, and the poorest of the poor, and the immigrant poor suffered first and longest and deepest.

The rural, farming types were subsistence farmers, making barely enough to continue their miserable lives year after year with little or no prospect of ever being able to save enough to make a better or fuller life for themselves and their families. It did not take much to cause them to enter into a dramatic downward spiral – too much rain; too little rain; a fall in crop prices; some new tax from Rome or Jerusalem; an over-zealous official; an illness or a death in the family and their entire livelihood was jeopardized. Such a farmer could easily become sick, because they were underfed, overtaxed, overworked. Such a farmer was sick because of hunger and poverty, preventing him from working, thus adding to his hunger, multiplying his poverty, speeding him to greater misery. Sick inside and out because of the paucity of resources meaning that he struggled to feed his family in the face of intolerable taxation or the loss of their land, or as some would put it, “Sick as the result of their sin”.

The only recourse open to such sick “sinners” was to go up to Jerusalem, to take time away from the old family place to make an offering in the Temple – offering away some of their already meager resources, to expiate their real or “imagined” sins. We see the irony of such a situation, they had to take time away from their fields, costing them income, in the hope that peace of mind or body might return. All the while the religious and secular leaders who lived and worked on “Western Wall Street” in the capital city continued to gain even as the next poor farmer failed!

Thus as we get into this story, you need to sense the desperation, to absorb the awful reality of all that is at stake. Be aware that someone’s life is at stake, and the life of a family and a community. Think Sally Field and her struggles in “Places of the Heart” and raise it several levels. We need to receive and welcome the paralyzed man, the poor farmer, for who he is, a real, feeling, failing, hurting, broken, worn down human being, unable to do or act or move – paralyzed by the life that has been squeezed from him. He is not just a type, not just an example, he is a real person, a real case in point, a true victim. A victim of a system that was meant to help him, meant to minister God to him. Don’t take your eyes off the unfairness of it all, the incredible inequity, the indescribable inequality, the inexpressible inevitability of all that is playing out before us as we enter into his struggle.

THE ORIGINAL FAMOUS QUOTE “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk”, dates back to an ad campaign launched in late 1982, in the run up to New Year’s Eve.

In the almost thirty years since then there have been a whole variety of plays on this original, “Friends don’t let friends . . .” sayings in films, in the media, in print, online, such as:

“Friends don’t let friends wear polyester.”
“Friends don’t let friends take home ugly men.”
“Friends don’t let friends wear ugly shoes.”
“Friends don’t let friends sing in public when they cannot even sing in private.”
“Friends don’t let friends wear their iPods on their belts.”
“Friends Don’t Let Friends Drink & Tweet.”
“Friends don’t let friends wear puffed sleeves.”
“Friends don’t let friends wear Speedos.”

In this incident in the second chapter of Mark we see a powerful demonstration that, **“Friends don’t give up on friends.”**

Four men, four friends are carrying their friend who is paralyzed on his mat and they are carrying him to an encounter with Jesus. No easy task at any time to carry what we call a “dead weight” any distance, even with four of them. No easy task when they arrive at Jesus’ home and find that everyman and his dog had gotten there ahead of them - no surprises there, these folks, the five of them were used to being late to the party, last to arrive, stuck in the back and as happened to them on this day, stuck on the outside.

Friends don’t give up on friends, and so they think “outside of the house” and they clamber and struggle to reach the roof where they create enough space through which they can lower their friend into the very presence, the nearer presence of Jesus.

Seeing their faith, seeing the faith of the four friends, seeing their trust, their commitment, their loyalty, Jesus says, “Son.”

In calling the man, "Son," Jesus immediately and fully connects with the man who is paralyzed, Jesus breaks through all the social barriers of exclusion and isolation and Jesus places himself in a direct relationship and kinship with this “Son”. This too is real miracle. While the man is still paralyzed; while his sins are as yet unforgiven, by this one word, Jesus draws the man back into a full, honored, place in the village social circle, he once again belongs, he matters, to God and to the community.

Jesus then goes on to say: “Your sins are forgiven.” “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Anything that has gotten between you and God – it is removed. Anything that has separated you from Yahweh is forgiven and forgotten. Anything that has taken you away from faithful living is hereby lifted from you fully and freely. Sins real and imagined; sins from within the man and sins placed on him by the community, sins of the past, the present and the future are forgiven, the man is restored and renewed. No more painful, costly trips to Jerusalem, no more expensive offerings, no more guilt and no more payments to the rich and powerful. “Son – your sins are forgiven!”

In that moment, the paralyzed man knew relief and hope; the weight of the world was lifted from him; his four friends on the roof knew deep joy as they high fived each other; the crowd began to be astonished; and oh yes, sadly, but predictably the representatives of the “ancien regime”, the lackeys of the Romans, the folks who profited from desperate trips to the Temple “were questioning in their hearts” – they were mad, they were fuming, blazing in anger. “Just who does this Jesus think he is! Only God can forgive sin, for a price, at the Temple – just who is this Jesus anyway?”

In this moment Jesus needs to and chooses to respond to their questioning and grumbling and complaining. Jesus responds to their assertions concerning the right way, God's way by asking a question: "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk?" At the human level, the scribes and all of us know what seems more difficult, and so to prove His point, Jesus without waiting for them to answer says to the paralyzed man, "Son, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

In this moment, at the word of Jesus the passive victim becomes an active participant in his own life and future. Jesus says to the man, "Carry on!" In the Greek text of this incident the same verb is used to describe how the four friends "carried" the man on his mat, and how, at the direction and encouragement of Jesus the man is to "carry" his own mat and to "Carry on!" into the new life gifted to him by Jesus. As the man obeys and does "Carry on!" into his new life the crowd parts around him and he leaves the house by a more conventional route than that by which he entered it!

This "Carry on!" is made possible, in part, by the chutzpah, the courage of the four friends. The four friends helped and served their friend by means of their prayers, they demonstrated, used and applied their energy, intelligence, imagination, and love in order to carry their friend to Jesus. And they were rewarded seeing their friend told by Jesus to "Carry on!"

At this moment there are several ways I could encourage you to think about and apply this story: I could point out to you that this story ends with amazement among the crowd, "We have never seen anything like this!" But I won't because for the writer of Mark amazement is a sign only of curiosity, maybe even in this incident of reverent curiosity but discipleship is an altogether deeper, different thing – evidenced in this story not by the scribes, not even by those pressing close to Jesus but by the four friends and the paralyzed man.

I could ask you to reflect on the thought that maybe we like the crowd are so crammed in close and tight to Jesus and thus we might be preventing others from being able to encounter Jesus – but no, this is not where I suggest you take time to reflect.

Instead I do want you to be captivated and captured by the example of the four friends who carried their friend to Jesus. I want you to see in what they did and in the results it achieved a picture of what we are to do and be as we "Carry on!" in all the work and ministry of our church.

Today we recognize, commission and encourage our Deacons and all the members of our congregation who serve on one of our twenty DeaconCare Leadership Teams. All of these people share together in offering and extending God's love, God's care, God's concern with and for every member of our church. By the active involvement and the prayerful passion of over 100 members of our church – Deacons and members we look to share and extend God's love to every member of our congregation.

Today we have the opportunity to speak our encouragement to them, to pray for them, to welcome their ministry and throughout this year we can echo such hopes and sentiments as we received their ministry to us and as we "carry on!" that ministry in yet wider and deeper ways by responding to the encouragement they offer to us by we ourselves being more ready and willing to play our fullest part in one or more ministries and missions as a congregation. Having been carried to Jesus the man was able to "Carry on!" and so can we, as we embrace the many opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others and to offer hope and love and joy and peace to people near and far.

True ministry in the church of Jesus Christ is always Mutual Ministry – each one receiving and giving; being cared for and caring; being loved and loving. Thus we should never reduce DeaconCare as something that someone else does to or for us – rather supported we are to be fully active about the ministry to which God has called us.

In the same way we look to nurture our children our youth, all our adults – so that they each in their own way will fully engage in the task or aspect of ministry to which they are called by God. We plan and share programs such as Sunday School, Youth Group, Choir, Friendship Fellowship and Together on Wednesday to train, and inspire all participants to “Carry on!”, God’s work in and through their lives.

Friends and members of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church we are being called today and always to “Carry on!”, to carry on God’s ministry, to share God’s life and love, to carry God to those in need or to carry those in need to God. All of us – each of us - members of the Body of Christ are being called to shared and mutual ministry.

As we move through 2012, as we embrace our vision for the future, as we prepare to celebrate our centennial we are asked to live into our calling, for we have:

people to carry;	roofs to repair;	stories to tell;
students to mentor;	websites to develop;	gifts to nurture;
songs to sing;	meals to cook;	prayers to offer;
walls to paint;	homes to build;	checks to write;
gifts to share;	bells to ring;	poems to pen;
stories to tell;	needs to hear;	classes to teach;
groups to gather;	friends to invite;	events to plan;
students to welcome;	strangers to greet;	retreat to enjoy;
prayers to offer;	hugs to extend;	cards to send;
shawls to knit;	seeds to plant;	chili to cook;
attitudes to challenge;	sermons to prepare;	circles to connect;
communion to serve;	bulletins to offer;	anthems to present;
blogs to create;	services to record;	gifts to gather;
calls to make;	offerings to contribute;	visits to continue;
candles to light;	budgets to develop;	minutes to write;
forgiveness to extend;	graphics to design;	tables to set;
hands to lay;	people to encourage;	passions to loose;
vows to take;	promises to keep;	callings to discover.

Carry on! Carry on people of faith,
Carry on about God’s work. Carry on with and for the lost and the lonely.

Carry on to grow in your spirit, to be challenged in your soul, to be living your faith.
Carry on with and alongside each other in embracing what God has for us to do and be.
Carry on.. partnering with all God’s people to carry on God’s work. Carry on!

Lives will be changed; your sense of God in you will thrive; the world will notice; God will be worshipped... and so Carry on! Amen.