

“Up On the Roof”
Luke 5:17-26
4th Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
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There’s a Netflix documentary that came out a year or two ago.
It’s about the relationship between the United States and Russia.
From WWII to the modern day.
One part of the documentary focuses on the Cold War.

There’s this great episode about what happened at the end of the
Cold War, when the Berlin Wall was about to come down.

It was November, 1989.

All these protests going on.

All these residents of East Berlin who were pressing for the wall to
come down, to cross over into West Berlin, to go to this part of their city
where they had never been before.

And there was confusion among the East German leaders.
Orders weren’t clear.

The West German news announced that the border between East
Berlin and West Berlin was open, but it wasn’t yet open.

East German guards were flummoxed.
Do we let the protestors through?
Do we force them to stay here?

Finally, at the Bornholmer Bridge, the officer in charge of the gate
was told—ok. You can let the protestors through, but stamp their
passport. And when you stamp it, they will be expelled from East Berlin
forever!

Of course, those who were let across weren't told any of that.

So there was this young couple who made their way through the gate. And they didn't go far. They spent a few minutes on the West Berlin side because they wanted to say they had done it.

But their home was in East Berlin.

In fact, they had a young baby that they needed to get back to right away.

So they approached the guard.

And the guard wouldn't let them back through the gate.

They said, "But our baby is back home."

The guard said, you can't get back through.

They said, "But our baby! You have to let us through!"¹

Now...I want you to picture that moment.

Can you imagine being the parents of that child at that moment?

I want you to listen to the voice of those parents.

Not just the surprise. But the desperation.

Can you hear the desperation?

The late preacher Fred Craddock once said that desperation has a voice. You can hear it.

And desperation has a look.

You can see it.²

¹ From "Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War," Episode Six.

² Fred Craddock once preached a sermon in which he described desperation this way.

In the spring of my junior year in college, I spent a semester in China.

Went to a church in Beijing on Easter Sunday.
I'll never forget it.

We arrived late, and were escorted to the front pew, saved especially for foreign guests on a Sunday morning. When the service was over, one of the church's ushers? I don't know. He spoke English, and he led us through the crowd outside, and there were all sorts of people out there.

Including people begging.
People who were destitute.

We had been instructed that we could get in pretty big trouble with the authorities if we gave money to someone who was begging.

So we walked by them.
But you could not UNSEE them.

And I'll never forget the man who was on a blanket, sitting there in rags for clothes, and he had no legs...just sitting there, holding out his hands...

What was his life like?
It's a memory that has stayed me for more than 30 years.
Why?
Because that man had the look of desperation...

I think you can see it in our text for today.
Take a good look at the man who is paralyzed.
Don't blow by him. Really...look at him.

Cannot get his own food.
Cannot earn his own living.
Completely dependent on others to make it through the day.

And then he hears about Jesus.
And he asks his friends to take him to Jesus.
And these friends of his, they will do anything for him, so they
carry their friend to Jesus.

But the crowd is too thick.
Jesus is too popular.
What are they going to do?

They think about giving up.
They don't want to give up.

One of them suggests the roof.
The roof?
Yes, the roof.
That's the craziest thing I've ever heard.

But they try it.

Somehow, they get up on the roof, and they get their friend with
his bed on the roof, and now these friends are scraping away the tiles of
the roof with their bare hands.

We're talking desperation...

Our topic for today's sermon...is desperation.
Faith and desperation.

Luke has a fondness, I think, for telling stories about desperation.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, Matthew has Jesus say: "Blessed are the poor in spirit..."

Luke is a bit different.

According to Luke, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor."

In other words, blessed are those who don't have enough, who are desperate...

Only in Luke do we hear the parable of the good Samaritan.

About the man who is beaten, left for dead on the road, utterly desperate...

Or take the parable of the prodigal.

Also only found in Luke.

After heading off for the distant country, all that money in his pockets, what does the younger son do?

He spends the inheritance on dissolute living.

And what happens next?

He decides to go back home.

But why?

When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need...He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

The younger brother doesn't head home because he's sorry.

He decides to go home...because he's hungry.

Because he is...DESPERATE.

So on the one hand, Luke clearly wants us to pay attention to the desperate. In our neighborhood, in our city, in our country...pay attention to the desperate, be a good neighbor to the desperate, love them like you love your own family.

Because the other thing Luke is saying is that the desperate might be in your family. In fact, the one is desperate, on any given day, according to Luke, is also me and you.

The job that suddenly came to an end, and you have no idea what to do next.

You want to end the drinking.
You're unable to stop the drinking.
For some, desperation is knowing that you yourself are not well.

For others, it's having a family member who is not well.
And you want to fix that member of your family.
And you cannot fix that person you love in your family.

Make no mistake.
Desperation is NOT something I would ever wish for anyone.

All of which makes the story we heard today from Luke even more curious. When the paralyzed man is up on the roof with his friends, it's a desperate moment.

And Luke writes:

“...they...let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he [Jesus] saw their faith...”

Wait a minute.
When Jesus saw their faith?

I thought Luke would write:
“When he saw how desperate they were...”

I looked at that man being lowered through the roof, and what I saw was desperation.

What Jesus saw...was faith.
Like faith and desperation go together.
Like they're two sides of the same coin.

Do you see what this means?

Faith isn't just about having our ducks in a row.
Faith isn't just about coming to church all put together, looking like a shiny Instagram post on Sunday morning.

Faith...has something to do with seeing and recognizing and owning up to...*how desperate we really are.*

I recall Fred Buechner writing about his daughter's anorexia.

“There was nothing scary about it at first,” he says.

“It was just the sort of thing any [child]...might do—
nothing for breakfast, maybe a carrot ...for lunch...”

“But then, as the months went by, it did become scary...

My anorectic daughter was in danger of starving herself to death....”

Like any parent, Buechner wanted to fix the situation. He was desperate to make his daughter well. But all the love Buechner could muster would NOT do the trick.

He goes on to say that when healing finally came for his daughter, it wasn't because of anything he did.

On the contrary, what helped the most
 was when his daughter was ordered to be hospitalized,
 by a judge who did not know her,
 in a city that was 3,000 miles away.

“...when my wife and I visited that distant hospital,” Buechner writes, “I have never felt God's presence more strongly...”.

“God in his very stillness,
 holding his breath,
 loving her, loving us all...
 the passionate restraint and hush of God.”³

Like I said, I would not wish desperation on any of you.
 But may I make a suggestion?

The next time you find yourself up on the roof, and the plan you formulate for yourself or for your loved one does not take you where you hoped it would take you, and your story does not turn out the way

³ Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991.

our story from Luke for today turned out today, with healing and amazement and a miracle that everyone can see...

If that happens to you, may I make a suggestion?
Don't throw your hands up in despair.

I want you to take your hands, and I want you to grab ahold of God's shirt sleeves.

Did you know that God has shirt sleeves?
Grab God by the sleeve, and say:
"God, help me...God, I can't do this on my own...
I'm desperate...help me..."

Not too long ago, I mentioned the Presbyterian pastor Tom Are in a sermon.

There's a book that Tom Are published that I highly recommend. It's called *Joy Even On Your Worst Days*.

In that book, Tom tells a story about his father. His father was also a minister.

And back in 1964, when Tom and his brother were still very young, and his sister had just been born, there was a day when his father went to the carport of their house...all by himself.

He went there to cry.
He went there to yell at God.

You see, the family had just received the bill from the hospital for the birth of Tom's sister, and it was an invoice that exceeded his father's salary.

On top of that, his wife, Tom's mother, was suffering from post-partem depression and she was in the hospital.

On top of that, the Civil Rights movement was everywhere, and Tom's father knew that support for the movement had put him at odds with enough of that church's congregation, that his days at the church were numbered.

When the mail arrived with the unpayable invoice, Tom says, his father went to the carport to weep and to pray.

Not a prayer book kind of prayer.
He vented his fear. He vented his pain.
He let God know just how disappointing God had been.
And then...well, what his father did next, Tom says, changed his life.

Tom's father decided to start tithing.

He already gave money to the church, of course, but at that moment, he decided to raise his pledge to 10%, to a tithe. He hoped that if he gave that much away, he would have control of his finances instead of his finances having control of him.

It was a turning point.
Eventually, Tom's mother got better.

And even though his dad left that church, another one found him and called him to its pulpit.

The point, Tom says, is not some prosperity gospel fairytale, in which tithing brings one-hundred-fold returns.

The point is that our faith is practiced.

It is lived out in daily choices.⁴
 Our daily habits.
 No matter what is going on in our lives.
 No matter how joyful we feel, or how desperate...

All of which got me thinking.
 How many of you have daily habits?
 For example, how many of you like to have coffee first thing in the morning?

You just have to have it. Me too.

I'm wondering if you would let me add another habit to your daily list?

It doesn't have to be done in the morning.
 You could do this...any time of the day.

What would happen if you made one of your daily habits grabbing the shirt-sleeves of God?

Every day, for five minutes,
 grabbing ahold of God,
 admitting your helplessness before God,
 seeking the grace of God in every relationship in your life,
 and then telling God—
 no matter what happens today,
 no matter what happens tomorrow,
 I'm never letting you go...

(Amen.)

⁴ Tom Are, Jr., *Joy Even On Your Worst Days: Wisdom from Philippians*, Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2021.