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HEALING HOSPITALITY Michael B. Beough
Mark 2:1-12 November 15, 2009
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For the past 5 weeks, in our small groups, daily prayer, and Sunday worship, we have been asking God to “unbind our hearts.” We know that about 60% of all people who come to a church for the first time do so because of a personal invitation. We are asking God to give us the wisdom and courage to invite others to a place where they can experience a new kind of life.

I know some of you have been doing that. And you have discovered how hard it is to get the unchurched to take that first step. It has been frustrating for you. But please don’t get discouraged. We plant the seed and water it, but God gives the increase.

Now, the question our study proposed for us this past week is this:

How willing are we as a congregation to dismantle the barriers that might keep someone from finding the healing presence of God in our house?

This is where the story in Mark 2 challenges me.

It says in verse 1 that Jesus came home after a tour through Capernaum with his disciples. He was probably looking for a little R&R. But it wasn’t to be. He had done miraculous things in Capernaum, teaching God’s love, healing diseases. His reputation had spread. And now people were even crowding into his home, so many that no one could get in or out. It tells me that even in all his tiredness, Jesus practiced hospitality.

Wouldn’t that be a wonderful problem for our church? Why isn’t it that way for all churches? **Here is the first challenge for me.** The people came to Jesus’ home because they knew they would find him there. No duh! They knew they would find the One who spoke remarkable words of forgiveness and who could heal their diseases. Here is what I believe. I believe all our churches would be overflowing with people if the people who showed up actually found Jesus there.

Week before last, some of you discovered just what some people think when they hear the word “church”. They don’t think they will find Jesus there. They think they will find an organization interested only in their money. Or they think they will find a judgmental group with lots of rules against just about everything. Or they think they will find that church is nothing more than a social club they don’t have time for.

It occurred to me this past week that when we invite an unchurched person to church, they may already have good reasons for not responding

positively to our invitation. It occurred to me that the word "church" itself is a barrier. We are victims of the bad press the church has gotten. So how do we overcome that barrier?

We have to find ways to share why being a part of the church is important to us. We are not just trying to get people to come to church. We want them to come experience what we experience. What is it about our experience of Jesus Christ that others cannot live without?

Maybe it is one of the following:

We find here the forgiveness and grace of God.

We find here a power-filled community that loves and serves the world.

We experience here peace in our souls.

We get prayed for here. (This is one of most important aspects of church for me. Here I get prayed for.)

We find here a larger purpose for our lives.

We find here the support we need when things go bad in our lives.

We find Jesus here in the fellowship with other believers.

We have fun here.

And, of course, if we say any of those things, we, the church, better make sure they are true. Wouldn't it be terrible if you promised a friend she or he would find the forgiveness and love of God here, and the first time they visit someone lets them know they are sitting in the wrong seat? That happened in a church I served in the past. My daughter invited a friend to come to our church and the whole family showed up one Sunday. They told me later that someone walked up to them and told them they were in their seat. Instead of finding Jesus, they had run into Genghis Khan.

People packed Jesus' house because they knew HE was there. That challenges me, and **it leads me right in to another challenge.**

The four friends who carried the paralytic man to Jesus did the most unorthodox thing to make sure their friend got to Jesus. They refused to let anything get in their way. They couldn't get in the traditional way, by the front door. So they took him up on Jesus' roof. Now I have often pictured them as making a nice, neat hole to lower their friend to Jesus. That's not what they did. They destroyed the roof. They tore it off. Can you imagine all that debris falling down on Jesus?

Talk about being willing to remove a barrier! Martha Grace Reese, the author of our study *Unbinding Your Heart*, asks us to look around at ourselves and at our place of worship and how we do things and consider the barriers that might keep visitors from coming back a second time or keep them from "getting in".

It could be as simple as a dirty nursery. "Oh, really," you say! "Get over it."

Or frowns on everyone's faces. When our consultant Tom Bandy visited us in worship in 2007, he reported later that he looked around and saw no one smiling. It was as if everyone were wishing they were someplace else. The frown is deadly, he said.

Or clique-ishness.

Or having to ask where the restrooms are located. "Now that's just too much!" you say. Is it really? Used to, if I were in a department store and needed a restroom, I would do everything in my power to keep from asking someone where the restrooms were. I would search the store. And if I didn't find them on my own, guess what I would do? I would go to another store. You guys know what I am talking about.

Or getting a glare when their child makes noise.

Or hearing nothing but useless chitchat about mundane things when what they need is a shoulder to cry on.

Or being asked to serve on a committee when what they want to do is change the world.

Or being overwhelmed with everyone's niceness when what they need is forgiveness, or just time to be silent with God.

The four friends knew there was nothing so sacrosanct that it should keep them from delivering their friend to Jesus. They were willing to do whatever it took. And this is the challenge for a lot of us who have been in the church FOREVER! *What do we need to dismantle, what roof do we need to deconstruct, so people can get to the Jesus we claim is here among us?*

Martha Grace Reese asks, "So how is your church doing?" Over the last several years, your leaders here at SBPC have been asking these questions. And we have made good progress. Wonderful ministries have emerged. Like our Hospitality Ministry provided by our Deacons. Like our prayer ministry that has grown by leaps and bounds. Like our Prayer Shawl Ministry. Like our Growth Groups where deep friendships and spiritual growth occur. Like our missions to help others in need. Like our outreach through Preschool and Upward sports.

And we have new initiatives underway. The expansion of our space with our new building. The transformation of our current space with murals and banners that tell who we are. The addition of a new worship service next year. Each in their own way, efforts to tear down barriers.

But how are we really doing? This morning I want you to hear from one of our newer members. She can't speak for every new person who has come to our house, but let us hear her story. What was it like for her to become a part of this congregation?

(Edy)

There are lots of people like Edy out there who need what the church offers. You know some of those people. I am going to ask our ushers at this time to hand each of you a packet of cards. The business card is for you to keep. Right now while you are thinking of it, write the names of three friends you want to invite to our worship on December 6. That will be the kick off day for our Advent Conspiracy series. Put the business card in your purse or wallet to remind you to pray for your names and ask God to give you an opportunity to invite them. Then take the three postcards and give one to each person on your list. Let them know you will be here and will personally welcome them. Tell them why church is important to you.

Four friends brought the paralytic to Jesus. Jesus not only forgave his sins, but told him to get up and walk. Christ has handed off that ministry to us, His church. We must do everything in our power to tear down the barriers so people can find among us the true Source of Life who forgives their sins and empowers them to walk in the newness of life.