

Four Good Friends

Today is Mother's Day, and the first thing I want to say this morning is that I thank God that God didn't equip me to be a mother. You see, I'm a chicken when it comes to pain, and when I think about what a woman has to go through to bring a baby into the world . . . well, there's no way I'd ever sign up for a gig like that.

But then again, I must be missing something. John 16:21 says, "A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world." In other words, the exquisite pain of childbirth is eclipsed by an even more exquisite joy. And, it must be true because most women who have a baby are willing and often even eager to have another one. They go through the pain to get to the joy. That's what I want to talk with you about this morning, going through the pain to get to the joy.

Did you know that we are all in process of birthing something? We are all on a spiritual journey to become like whom? That's right. We are all on a spiritual journey to become like Jesus. We are destined to be conformed to His image and to know the joy of our Lord. But we need to go through some pain to get to the joy.

Now, turn with me to Mark, chapter 2, verses 1-12. This is a true story about 5 friends and Jesus. One of the 5 friends is paralyzed and the other 4 believe that if only they can get their paralyzed friend to Jesus, Jesus will be able to help him. The immediate problem the 4 friends face is that Jesus is in a house teaching and such a crowd has gathered around Him that they cannot get their friend to him, especially on a stretcher. But the four friends are determined and ingenious. Somehow they get their stretcher-bound friend up on the roof of the house, dig a hole in the roof, and lower their friend down by ropes into the presence of Jesus, whereupon Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of their paralyzed friend's sins, and then tells him to pick up his stretcher and walk. The man is gloriously healed.

Now most of you have heard this story preached and taught many times and most of the time it's all about the four friends' compassion and about the hard work they are willing to do to get their paralyzed friend to Jesus. We usually apply this story to the task of evangelism and suggest that we need to be like those 4 friends in finding ways to get our friends and neighbors to Jesus, so they too can be forgiven and healed. And, as we say in the company of other pastors, "That will preach." That's a good and important message. We do need to find ways to bring others to Christ.

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But, I want to take a different tack this morning and think about this story from the perspective of the man who is paralyzed and I want to suggest further that this paralyzed man is me and that this paralyzed man is you. For the truth is that all of us have our areas of paralysis, areas where we are not whole, areas where we need to be forgiven and healed and set free by Jesus.

To put it another way, we know by Scripture that it is God's plan that every Christian is to be conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ, that He might be the first-born among many children. We are all called and destined to become like Jesus. That's the future story of our lives. That's the vision. This is where we are headed. But the reality of the situation is that we are not there yet. Another difficult thing about being a mother is being in the car with your children and hearing them say over and over again, "Mommy, are we there yet?" **We are not there yet either.**

So I'm when I'm talking about paralysis in our lives this morning, I'm talking about what it is in our lives that keeps us from being there yet or about that in our lives that hinders our progress toward becoming like Jesus. And when I am talking about the four friends who help the paralytic find healing, I am talking about the things inside us that can motivate us toward wholeness. And guess what? We all have these four friends and every one of them is a pain.

In the Pastor's of Excellence Retreat program I'm involved in at Ashland Seminary in Ohio, the leaders have been pushing us toward excellence in four directions. They speak of it in terms of four journeys: the journey upward toward a deeper, more intimate relationship with God; the journey inward toward a greater emotional and physical well-being; the journey outward toward healthier relationships with one another; and the journey forward which is all about continual learning and becoming more skilled as pastoral leaders. I want to suggest this morning that these four journeys correspond to the four friends each of us has within us--four friends who will help release us from paralysis and help us give birth to the new life God is creating in us and among us.

The first friend I believe we all have within us I'm going to call "Hank," because he is a "hankering" after God. There is within us all a spiritual loneliness, a God-shaped vacuum, a spiritual thirst and soul ache that urges us on the upward journey. The basic story of the Bible is that we were created for an intimate relationship with God; but, through sin, that intimate relationship was broken. Thus we became separated from the One who loves us and from the One we are meant to

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love. The Bible tells us that God has answered this need in the gift of His Son Jesus, who died for our forgiveness and was raised from death and then sent the Holy Spirit to bring us back to that intimate relationship we are supposed to have with Him.

The problem is, however, that Hank's mission is often short-circuited. We are led to believe that if we simply invite Jesus into our hearts as Savior and Lord, Hank will go away and our spiritual yearning will be satisfied. But, there is more to it than that. Receiving Christ as our Savior is just the beginning of a larger story. **Being a Christian is not a one-time decision it's a full-time relationship.** If we want Hank to quit nagging us, we need to learn how to meditate on Scripture and how to pray. We need to learn that Jesus is with us every day in every moment and in all things. Jesus tells us that He is the Good Shepherd and that His sheep recognize His voice; we need to come to that place in our lives where we can recognize and respond to His voice.

Although Hank is a pain, he is also our good friend. If we pay attention to the spiritual hankering within, it will cause us to reach for that level of intimacy with God that we are meant to have. Hank is a spiritual guide calling us to the spiritual depth we need to reach in order to experience lasting joy in God's presence. **But we must go through the pain to reach the joy.**

Our first friend is Hank; he will help us get past our spiritual paralysis and help us to experience the joy and freedom of those who walk with God. Our second friend is called Watsin, that's Watsin as opposed to Watson. And, "what's in" most of us are one or more traumatic childhood, teen, or young adult experiences that have left us with a certain amount of emotional and psychological paralysis. The truth is that many of us if not most of us are among the walking wounded.

To help you get in touch with Watsin, I only need to ask you to think about that one thing in your life that you don't like to think about, that one thing that makes your face red and your ears burn with shame. Or, perhaps it is that one thing that triggers immediate anger, fear, or remorse. Perhaps you were abused in the bedroom, bullied on the playground, or humiliated in the classroom. But, whatever the wound might be, that wound has never been sufficiently healed. It still hinders your life today because you find yourself irrationally angry, fearful, or sad in situations that do not warrant such strong emotions.

Perhaps you are paralyzed when it comes to trusting people because someone in your past broke that trust. You are afraid to trust, afraid to love, unable to receive love from others. Ah, Watsin is a great pain to be sure, but if you will let him, Watsin will help you position yourself for healing. Watsin may be pushing you to a professional counselor or encouraging you to seek out a spiritual friend or perhaps a support group where the long-buried cry of your heart may be spoken and where you can be prayed for and affirmed. To be sure, it will be painful to face the wound within, but if we never deal with the wounds we will never be free. **We must go through the pain to reach the joy.**

Well, now you have met Hank, whose full name is Spiritual Hankering, and Watsin who gives voice to the painful wounds of the child who lives within us. I would suggest that our third friend should be called Lightener. Lightener should be called Lightener in two senses. For though he too inflicts pain by shedding light on our wounds, he also lightens our burden. Lightener is a guide on the outward journey, and motivates us to share our burdens with each other because they have become too heavy for us to bear them alone.

I was reading in my morning devotions one day last week and came across the following phrase at the end of Romans 13:12: Paul says, “put on the armor of light.” “The armor of light:” As I meditated on that phrase it came to me: As long as we keep our temptations and all our spiritual and emotional wounds secret, stored away in some dark place, their power over us will grow stronger and stronger. Spiritual and emotional wounds are like mushrooms; they grown best in the dark. But if we put on the armor of light and share them with one another in a caring praying community, their power over us can be broken. Surely it will be painful to bring the dark stuff out in the open, but O what a relief once it’s done. Once again, **We must go through the pain to reach the joy.**

Yes, Hank, Watsin, and Lightener are painful friends; but, if we allow them to help us, they will bring us to Jesus where our paralysis can be cured, where we can gain assurance of our sins forgiven, and find a community of other believers who will go with us on our spiritual journey through life. The fourth and final friend is named Houd, as in “How do you do it?” Houd’s just a very practical fellow. Sometimes the things that hold us back are not weakness in our relationship with God or unresolved emotional trauma, or a lack of spiritual fellowship; sometimes we just don’t know how to do what we feel called to do. We lack the training, the knowledge, the skill we need to get things done. Old Houd is a painful friend in the sense that he requires us to humble ourselves, admit that we need help, and seek

out teachers and opportunities to learn. The process of study, learning new skills, going back to school, can be difficult, even painful; but, according to II Timothy 3:17, God’s servants are counseled to be “thoroughly equipped for every good work.” **But if we want to move forward, we must go through the pain to reach the joy.**

Now before you tune me out because of the word "pain," let me tell you where our focus needs to be. I'm the oldest of six siblings. I have three children of my own and three grandchildren, so I can speak with some authority about this.

I remember my mother when she was with child. I remember my wife with child. I've seen my daughter-in-law with child, and in my 38 years of ministry I have visited and talked with many pregnant women. Do you know what the number one thing in women's minds and hearts is when they are with child? Do you know what they are focused on? They are not focused on the pain. I've never had anyone say to me, "O pastor, I'm so worried about the pain!" No, the number one thing in their hearts and minds is the baby. It's all about the baby and all about the joy of bringing that child into the world.

We have to go through pain to be born again and to move forward on our spiritual journeys, but the focus isn't on the pain. The focus is on the joy that new life and renewed life in Christ will bring us. **It's all about the joy.**

Hank, Watsin, Lightener, and Houd can bring us a lot of pain, but if we allow them to bring us into the presence of Jesus, He will set us free from our paralysis and give us His joy. In the end, it’s all about the joy.

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Four Good Friends

Mark 2:1-12

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