

DOING WHATEVER IT TAKES

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

1 Corinthians 9:19-23
Luke 5:17-26

June 23, 2019

They loved their friend, and for a long time they had wanted to help him but didn't know how. But then word got around about a powerful healer, a man of God, who had come to town. Suddenly, they knew exactly what they had to do. They picked up and carried their paralyzed friend to the healer named Jesus.

Of course, the news about Jesus being in town spread quickly, and people had come from miles around to see him. As the friends approached the house where Jesus was preaching and teaching and healing, they could see it was packed. In fact, it was overflowing with people – people who were sick, desperate, possessed – people who were curious, faithful, and even some who were skeptical. It seemed like everyone had come out to see Jesus, to hear Jesus, to be touched by Jesus. The friends tried to make their way through the crowd and get through the door of the house, but there were just too many people and everyone wanted to see Jesus. It appeared unlikely they would ever be able to get their friend close to Jesus. Some may have given up and headed home at this point, but not these friends. Love is a compelling force and it strengthened their determination. Nothing was going to stop them!

Obviously, they couldn't get through the door, but they came up with another way, a creative, daring approach that also happened to be a bit destructive. They carried their paralyzed friend up to the roof – in those days many houses had an outside stairway to the roof, and that's where people slept at night when it was really hot. Once up there, they tore up the tile and dug through whatever other flooring or ceiling material was a barrier between them and Jesus in the room below. After they created a big enough hole, they slowly and carefully lowered their friend and placed him at the feet of Jesus. I imagine the homeowners were not at all happy, and as dust and debris fell, it must have been unsettling for everyone gathered in the room below. Those friends had seized the opportunity, and they dealt with the physical obstacles as well as the resulting emotional responses as they came.

Jesus was impressed by the determination, ingenuity and faith of those friends who were willing to do whatever it took to overcome the barriers that prevented their friend from meeting Jesus. Because they had faith, their paralyzed friend discovered hope and experienced healing. Because of Jesus, that man entered into a new life that was filled with opportunities he would have never known otherwise.

More important than the barriers that exist is the reality that many people in our community, perhaps some in our own homes, live lives that need to be touched by the healing hand of Jesus. Sometimes, it's sinful influences and tragic circumstances that paralyze them. There are various beds of affliction; some are paralyzed by fear and chemical addiction, by abusive relationships, by loneliness, depression, confusion, broken promises, and dashed dreams. They suffer from low self-esteem and self-hate, by misplaced loyalties and even mixed-up priorities. Some are crying out for help, others do not even realize they need help. The yearning for meaning may be difficult for many to define, but the human soul craves it. Sometimes people need a word of encouragement, a spiritual nudge or practically a physical push to get them to the One who can change their lives – the One who can help them rise up and walk in newness of life.

But for this to happen, we need to stop long enough from doing business as usual to notice the paralysis and to take action; we need to actually listen for the cries and respond. Yes, we may need to practically pick them up; we may need to be creative and gutsy in order to get them to Jesus. A roof, a wall, or a gate may need to be torn down. Perhaps a walkway needs to be cleared or widened, and a bridge needs to be built. Perhaps, our beautiful sanctuary isn't as welcoming and comfortable for others as we think.

Have you seriously thought about the barriers we have created that prevent others from getting to Jesus? Of course, we love our church – it has a special place in our hearts. We don't really want to think that our building might look threatening or unattractive or may be confusing to some. For others, this place might remind them of old hurts and disappointments. In fact, we need to consider whether our own actions or lack of action both inside and outside the church could be what is preventing others from getting to Jesus. Sometimes, a lack of faith-led, passionate volunteers holds a church hostage and can prevent us from being involved in truly meaningful and visible ways in the community. If not us, then who will pave the way, open the door, tear apart the roof, and lower down the stretcher – who will do whatever it takes to accomplish the mission and bring people to a place where they can encounter Christ?

We are those who already know the Lord's healing touch. We know from experience that Jesus' presence means deliverance and power; it means hope, peace, joy and the blessed gift of salvation. Not everyone knows this. Yes, some have a vague understanding or knowledge of Jesus, but they have not seen for themselves and so they just don't know what it means to be personally touched and forever changed by Jesus. To accomplish the mission of making disciples, we must be willing to do whatever it takes to bring people to Christ. We need to do whatever it takes to make the Gospel compelling, relevant and transforming for those who have already laid it aside as being boring and irrelevant. There are all kinds of barriers these days that hinder people from getting to Jesus. We need to recognize the barriers and then care enough to remove them.

The Healthy Church Initiative process in which we have been engaged for over a year has been helping us to identify barriers. The Sunday Morning Evaluation Taskforce was specifically assembled to consider the specific barriers that confront people coming to this church for the first time on a Sunday morning. After meeting five times from February to May, the Taskforce presented to the Church Council just this past Tuesday four categories of recommendations – the outside approach to the church, the physical space of the church, communications, and actual worship services. These recommendations were received and will be further discussed and addressed by various church committees, ministry teams, as well as the Church Council in the months ahead. Now that the Taskforce has accomplished their specific task of making recommendations to our Church Council, the taskforce is morphing into a Hospitality Team. I hope some of you might consider joining us as we continue to identify and eliminate physical, experiential, communication and worship barriers and so improve our Sunday morning experience for guests.

Without exception, we must each be willing to address misconceptions about Christ's church and in particular this church. There are also misconceptions about what a relationship with Jesus Christ means, and the blessing it is to be part of the living, active Body of Christ. Misconceptions are barriers, so our job as disciples of Jesus Christ is to go out, connect with people and address those issues.

Doing whatever it takes is about breaking down/eliminating barriers, but it's also about going out and developing relationships, reaching both people we know as well as those we don't yet know. Did all of you read my newsletter article for June and July? (Don't worry, I'm not going to have you raise your hands – personally, I'm not sure I want to know) My article was a modified review of our Reaching New People Workshop on March 31. Eighteen people attended that workshop; if you did not and you haven't read my article, please read it and take seriously through prayer and intentional action the ways you personally can connect with and reach new people for Christ.

And one more thing! We have a new Community Relations Team. It has met a couple of times and the group is focusing on what it means to go out, to connect with others and to develop relationships. Once again, I hope some of you will join that Team and help them accomplish the task of connecting and developing relationships. The paralyzed man would not have met Jesus that day many years ago if it hadn't been for caring friends.

Jesus is still the answer for the world's pain and suffering. He is the answer for the anger, violence and moral decline, for the hopelessness, selfishness, blind busyness and meaninglessness that permeates our society. People have questions and they are struggling in ways that we don't even know, but God knows. By any means necessary we need to get them to Jesus so they can find answers and also discover the gift of contentment in the midst of life's struggles.

People today like in every generation yearn for meaning in their lives, but unfortunately, too many don't even consider how a relationship with Christ and connecting with a community of faith might satisfy that yearning. We know this is for a variety of misconceptions and reasons, some deserved and some not. But if we as a church are going to move forward in faith, embracing the mission of making disciples, we need to do whatever it takes to get people to Jesus. If we can find ways to connect with others – if we can find effective ways to share the love, the grace, the power of Christ, then others will want to get to know the Lord we know. Paul put it this way, "I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some." (1 Cor. 9:22) Apparently, "by whatever means possible" was an important part of Paul's very effective strategy of introducing others to Christ.

This confronting and tearing down barriers is hard and even scary. Do I find it intimidating? You bet! I've always found comfort working within the existing framework, following the rules, and doing those things that are familiar. I think many of you know exactly what I mean. But the thing is, Jesus is in the house and the main purpose of the church is to introduce people to the Christ we know. Therefore, it is up to us to connect and develop relationships. It's up to us to remove barriers – whether they be physical obstacles or our own personal behaviors that prevent others from entering into Christ's presence. When we have done everything we possibly can, then we step aside and let the Lord do the amazing things he does – things like healing and reconciliation, like new and abundant life.

"Doing whatever it takes" – I think it sounds like a great motto, perhaps even a battle cry! May it be so! Amen.