

Breaking and Entering

True Christian community does whatever it takes to connect a friend with Jesus.
by John Ortberg

One of the great stories in the Bible about community involves a paralyzed man and the friends who brought him to Jesus (Mark 2:1-8).

Imagine what life was like for a paralytic in the ancient world. This man's whole life is lived on a mat three-feet wide and six-feet long. Someone has to feed him, carry him, clothe him, move him to keep him from being covered with bedsores, clean him when he soils himself. He will never know the sense of independence we prize so fiercely.

Nothing can be done medically—no surgeries, no rehab programs, no treatment centers. Anyone in this man's condition has to go through life as a beggar—be laid by the side of the road, be dependent on people dropping coins beside him to live another day. He has no money, no job, no influence, no family, and seemingly not much of a future.

What's he got going for him? He has friends. He has amazing friends.

He is in one of the killer small groups of all time.

In one sense, this whole story takes place because of his friends. Without his friends he never makes it to Jesus, never gets healed, never gets forgiven.

Choosing community

You should know that for the man in this story the development of these friendships did not happen accidentally. Because of his physical condition, the deck was stacked against friendships emerging here at all. Even in our day people who wrestle with physical challenges often say that the most difficult obstacles they face are the attitudes of so-called normal people, who are sometimes anxious about how to respond, sometimes are unkind, sometimes look away and avoid meeting eye to eye. This is a fast-paced world, and it is not a very gracious place for those who can't run as fast as others.

But the ancient world could be even harsher. The Greeks regularly disposed of newborn infants with physical anomalies. In Rome, during the 5th century B.C., there was actually a statute on the books: Quickly kill a deformed child.

In Israel, there was an assumption that if people were suffering physically, they had brought it on themselves. In another New Testament story the disciples see a man blind from birth and ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Yet, here is a little band of men who refuse to let any obstacle stop them. And this is a key point: Their little group did not come about by accident. In the face of formidable obstacles—social stigma, inconvenience, financial pressure, a high cost of time and energy—they chose to become friends.

People rarely drift into deep community. One of the most countercultural statements in Scripture is a description of the early church. In speaking of the people's oneness of heart and mind, the writer notes, "They met together *daily*." They worshiped together, ate together, prayed together—on a daily basis. No wonder they grew so close.

We try to create 1st-century community on a 21st-century timetable—and it doesn't work. Maybe the biggest single barrier to deep connectedness for most of us is simply the pace of our lives. How often do you hear (or say) things like, "We've got to get together soon" or "Let's do lunch in a few weeks when things settle down"?

The requirement for true intimacy is unhurried time. If you think you can fit deep community into the cracks of an overloaded schedule—think again. Wise people do not try to microwave friendship, parenting, or marriage. You can't do community in a hurry.

You can't listen in a hurry. You can't mourn or rejoice in a hurry.

Many people lack great friends for the simple reason that they have never made pursuing community a high priority you can't carry somebody's mat in a hurry. And everyone comes with a mat.

The Fellowship of the Mat

Think about what the paralyzed man goes through in order to be friends with this group of men. He must have wrestled with his sense of dependence. I suspect at times he became jealous. Sometimes he must have wished in the secret places of his heart that he could trade places with one of them.

It is a very vulnerable thing to have someone carry your mat. When somebody's carrying your mat, they see you in your weakness.

There is the gift between these friends: trusting vulnerability and dependable faithfulness. This mat, which according to society should have created a great gulf between him and them, instead became an opportunity for servanthood and acceptance. This group becomes the Fellowship of the Mat. Wherever human beings love and accept and serve each other in the face of weakness and need, there is the Fellowship of the Mat.

Here is the truth about us: Everybody has a mat. Let the mat stand as a picture of human brokenness and imperfection. It is what is "not normal" about me. It is the little "as-is" tag that I most desire to hide. But it is only when we allow others to see our mat, when we give and receive help with each other, that healing becomes possible. Every effective Alcoholics Anonymous meeting is a Fellowship of the Mat. So are healthy families and churches.

Because everybody has a mat.

Maybe your mat is a raging temper, fear, or an inability to trust. Maybe it's a need to be in control. Maybe your mat involves a terrible secret of some awful thing you did that you still feel guilty about. Maybe it is a crushing sense of failure, or inadequacy, or loneliness.

Community is made up of people with all their richness, but also with their weakness and poverty, of people who accept and forgive each other, who are vulnerable with each other. Humility and trust are more at the foundation of community than perfection.

If you want a deep friendship, you can't always be the strong one. You will sometimes have to let somebody else carry your mat.

That is what happens in the Bible story. This group of people become friends. It requires formidable character and intentionality. Perhaps because one man's vulnerability is so

visible, they all become more honest about their mats. Against all odds, they form a little community.

A gang of roof-crashers

Then one day Jesus comes to their town. These four men find out about it, and naturally they want to hear this famous rabbi.

One of them says, "We can't just go ourselves. We've got to get our friend there. This could really encourage him. And maybe these things they're saying about Jesus are true. Maybe Jesus really can heal our friend—wouldn't that be something! We gotta get him there!"

To do that is going to make things harder logistically, but they're not thinking about themselves. They are thinking of him. Friends do that. Friends serve each other. When they get to the home where Jesus is teaching, it is standing room only "There was no room left, not even outside the door," the Bible says. Jesus is so close, but they can't get through to him. The men hadn't counted on this. They had been so excited, and now they're shut out.

Then one of them gets an idea—probably the youngest guy the tattooed and pierced guy, because he's an outside-the-box thinker.

"Dudes! What if we make a hole and lower him through the roof! *Whoaaa!*"

They realize it's an unorthodox way to get into a room, but they are desperate to get to Jesus. They had decided they wouldn't let anything get in their way, so strong is their trust in Jesus, so great their love for their friend.

The man's friends must wonder how Jesus will respond to their unconventional plan. I know from personal experience that teachers can get a little touchy about being interrupted. You'll notice Jesus made sure he came to earth before there were beepers and pagers and cell phones ("in the fullness of time" is the biblical phrase for it).

Jesus looks up and sees the faces of four friends staring down at him. They have nothing to ask for themselves. Their only thought is, "If we can just get our friend close to Jesus ..." That's what great friends want to do for each other.

Then the text says an amazing thing: "When Jesus saw their faith ..."

Usually healing stories speak of Jesus seeing the faith of the one asking for healing for themselves or their child. Here it's the faith, not primarily of the man, but of his friends.

Do you have any idea what the faith of one person can do for a friend?

They dug a hole through a roof and sent in their friend. There is no record of their saying anything. It is not what he heard that moved Jesus; we are told that he saw their faith. What did he see?

A big hole in the ceiling, four faces in it—sweaty, dusty, anxious, hopeful faces thinking only of their friend and trusting somehow that Jesus will respond. Jesus sees a group that possesses and acts on an irrational commitment to the well-being of one of its members.

Jesus sees a little of what God intended when he made human beings. He sees people who love even in the face of shame and brokenness. He thinks to himself that this is humanity at its finest.

He sees their faith.

Jesus turns and looks down at this twisted, motionless body on a mat. He sees not only a broken body but—as in every one of us—a broken, fallen soul.

He speaks tenderly: "Son, your sins are forgiven."

I wonder what the man on the mat thinks at this point. He hadn't really signed up to have his sins talked about.

But it's one of the things that happen when you get neck deep into community. In deep community with Jesus, in the Fellowship of the Mat, we find our sin being talked about and forgiven.

Jesus is filling the desires of this man's friends, perhaps even deeper than they realize. When someone is your friend your greatest desire for them—deeper than external well-being or even physical health—is that things are right between them and God. If someone is truly my friend, their deepest concern is the well-being of my character, my soul.

This man—who has been mocked and judged by people who assumed that his damaged body indicated that he was spiritually inferior—this man is told by Jesus, "You're clean. You're forgiven. You are right with God."

It is striking that Jesus knew the man needed forgiveness as well as healing. A friend of mine asked recently, "What sins can a paralytic do, anyway?" Jesus understood, of course, that the deadliest sins—resentment, arrogance, judgmentalism, lovelessness—are ones we can commit without lifting a finger.

The gift that keeps living

A key part of this story is that there are others present in the room—teachers of the law, people who were thought of (and thought of themselves) as spiritual giants. They apparently arrived on time and got good seats. But you will notice that they had no friends to bring to Jesus. They were supposed to be the spiritual ones—but apparently no one they knew was hurting or confused or needed Jesus.

There is an important implication to this. It is simply impossible to love the Father without also sharing his heart for people.

I grew up in circles where many people *thought* they were becoming more spiritual because they attended many church services or watched many preachers on television or memorized many Bible verses. But their *hearts* for people—especially for people far from God, for the lost, for the searching, for people with bad habits—got a little harder and colder and more judgmental year after year. What is bad is not just that this happened but that these people thought they were growing spiritually.

The truth is, the more spiritually mature you grow, the more you will find your heart drawn to people. You want to reach out to people, especially those neglected by society or far from God.

This was the condition of the "teachers of the law" who sat listening to Jesus. They had no one to bring to him. And they had no love for the paralyzed man who needed Jesus' touch.

But Jesus is concerned for his critics, too. He loves them, just as he loves the men coming through the ceiling. So he acts as if to say, "Just so you see I have authority ..." He turns to the man on the mat: "Get up, take your mat, go home."

Silence. Everyone watches.

Obviously, if the man had been paralyzed, all his muscles would have atrophied. Jesus not only cures paralysis but throws in muscle tone as well.

The man stands up. He lifts his mat off the ground. He folds it up. He has spent his whole life on that thing. And suddenly—never again.

His world has enlarged from three-by-six to as far as his feet can carry him. Not just his body has been healed. His heart has also. His soul. Every sin has been forgiven. Physically, relationally, spiritually, he is the healthiest guy in the room.

Imagine when he becomes an old man and hits 80. The other members of his small group are using walkers and canes. His legs are still running strong.

One by one the man's friends begin to pass away. Every time he looks at that mat, he remembers the little community he was part of that crashed through a roof for him. His greatest gift, humanly speaking, wasn't his legs. It was his friends. There's no gift like the gift of community.

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