

"Six strong Friends"

Mark 2:1-12

February 19, 2006

As the wind blew and the temperatures fell the other day I ran across the story of a man huddled on the cabin floor was slowly freezing to death. It was high in the Rockies in southwestern Alberta, and outside a blizzard raged. John Elliott was a forest ranger and had logged many miles that day through the deep snows of the mountain passes checking for avalanches. As dusk and exhaustion overcame him he made it to his cabin - but somewhat dazed with fatigue, he did not light a fire or remove his wet clothing. As the blizzard blasted through the cracks in the old cabin walls, the sleeping forest ranger sank into oblivion, paralyzed by the pleasure of the storm's icy caress. Suddenly, however, his dog sprang into action, and with unrelenting whines, finally managed to rouse his near-comatose friend. The dog was John's constant companion, a St. Bernard, one of a long line of dogs famous for their heroics in times of crisis. "If that dog hadn't been with me, I'd be dead today," John Elliott says. "When you're freezing to death you actually feel warm all over, and don't wake up because it feels too good."

I have never heard that before. I would have imagined that the colder one got, the more uncomfortable it would become until a person would either force themselves into action or at least come to the point of believing that there was nothing that could be done. Imagine freezing to death but actually feeling warm and unwilling to do something about it. Sometimes we really need a friend - man, woman or St. Bernard who will be persistent enough to roust us from what ever cold hand grips us.

I share all of this with you as I think of the Gospel text this morning. I suspect that the events in this Gospel text are among the most familiar of the healing miracles. The situation is amazing. The fame of Jesus has spread as people have witnessed his power to heal and listened to His equally powerful words. He has been traveling from town to town in the region of Galilee, preaching, teaching and healing. Now He has come home to Capernaum. When He arrives the word spreads so fast that, before you knew it, folks from all over town had gathered in the house, out on the front yard and down the street - all just hoping to get close - to hear His words - or perhaps to experience His healing power. In a crowd like that, what chance would a paralyzed person have. Slim to none, I suspect - - but for that fact that this person had friends - friends with a great deal of creativity and determination. I am sure that you know the story and perhaps even remember the images that your Sunday School teachers might have shown while telling that story. A man on a stretcher being lowered through the roof down to where Jesus was standing in the midst of a crowd. It is a beautiful thing to have friends that will lift you up and carry you so that you can come before Jesus - friends that you roust you out of the cold and carry

you to where healing can happen. I suppose that when I have considered this healing even in the past I have often focused on the power of Jesus to forgive sin - and to heal. I know that often I have spent too much time obsessing on the physical act of how they might have removed the roof to let the paralytic down. But this week, I found myself thinking about the friends who carried him.

I don't know if you notice the 3 little pictures that I asked our Secretary to include in the bulletin this morning. They are a part of something that was called "The Church Ad Project". The project included some of the most clever, provocative and creative religious images I have seen. As I pictured the gospel text and the friends of the paralyzed man carrying him up the stairs to the roof so that they could let him down before Jesus, I thought of one of the most thought provoking of the ads.

"Will it take six strong men to bring you back to

church?" In the small print just above the picture of the pall bearers carrying the casket the ad says, *"Our church welcomes you no matter what condition you're in, but we'd really prefer to see you breathing. Come and join us in the love, worship and fellowship of Jesus Christ this Sunday."*

Having 6 strong friends is a good thing. I suspect that without them the paralytic would have never been healed. Without friends, the paralyzed man would have seen no way for him to move out of the cold. I also suspect that he did not raise to much of an objection to his friends when they suggested that they would carry him there. Perhaps there was a bit of hesitation when they suggest the plan of cutting through the roof and lowering him down to Jesus. But all in all I would not imagine too much of fight. Too often that is not the case with those important friends of ours who need to come before Jesus. Too often, it seems that when we are aware of a friend who is in need we are reluctant to push too hard. We may say that it is none of our business. We may not want to get involved. But that person caught in the grip so some 'cold hand' may not even recognize that they are freezing to death - that person lying on the stretcher may even feel some sense of warmth in a situation that is familiar no matter how intense the pain.

Six strong friends are so important. But I do believe that God would rather have us step in and pick up the one in pain while they are still breathing - before the darkness becomes too all encompassing - before the cold actually begins to feel like warmth.

Do you know someone in need of six strong friends - or even one? The need, the darkness, the cold, whatever it is that paralyzes can take so many forms. I find myself thinking so often of a conference that I attended last fall on the subject of bullying. It was scary to see the images of what some kids go through as they were picked on and ostracized by others for any number of reasons. What I especially think of was how strongly they emphasized the importance of the friends - the importance of those good kids who know it is wrong but who, too often stand on the sidelines because of their own fears. The leaders of the conference believed that any

real change in the situation would come when those good kids stepped up to say that the bullying was wrong. - - - Last Friday a conference on domestic violence was held here. The information was really good and reminded me of situations into which I have been called to minister over the years. I think of how terribly 'paralyzed' the victims expressed that they felt and how important it would be for 6 strong friends to step in and say this violence is wrong and we can carry you to a place of healing. - - Or something as simple as just inviting a person to worship. Did you know that on average a good Lutheran will only invite another person to come to Christ once every 18 ½ years. People need 6 strong friends. Jesus has the power to heal - Jesus has the power to forgive. Let us lift together and bring the wounded to a source of healing.

AMEN