

April 13, 2008
 Acts 27:13-26 / Luke 5:17-26
 Luke (#15) - Exercising Faith on Behalf of Others

This text is so loaded with insights and possible avenues of approaching the content in it that it was hard to know which way I should go with it. In fact, I felt somewhat like a man standing at the intersection of three roads, trying to decide which one I would turn down and follow in order to get to my desired destination!

Yet rather than do what many have done and simply focus on one theme in the text, I thought I would simply follow the entire text from beginning to end. It's easier not to get lost that way!

So, let me set the stage for you, or give you the background information and details that are necessary for you to understand what's going on and why.

FIRST you need to know (if you didn't already pick up on it) that this text is permeated (from beginning to end) with a tension in the air that stems from the presence of TWO very different groups of people who are there for two very different reasons:

The first group is the *"Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee, and from Judea and Jerusalem."* Word had apparently reached the 70 Member Sanhedrin in Jerusalem (the ruling council that oversaw religious issues in Israel) that a young upstart rabbi was doing amazing things and attracting great crowds of people in Galilee.

As a result they apparently contacted the leaders of all the synagogues in Galilee and had them go to Capernaum, where they all converge upon Peter's house along with all the religious big wigs from Judea and Jerusalem.

These men are NOT there as supporters of Jesus. They're not there to be ministered to by Jesus nor to learn from Him and be edified. Rather, they were coming with a critical eye to see if they could find something wrong with what Jesus taught, said, or did. They were "fault finders" or "heresy hunters" just waiting for this renegade Jesus to make one wrong move, say one wrong word, or step out of line in the slightest way.

Alexander Maclaren (rightly I believe) summarizes the situation this way:

"One can easily imagine that these heresy-hunters would be much too superior persons to mix with the crowd...and would as Luke says, be "sitting by"—near enough to see and hear, but far enough to show that they had no share in the vulgar enthusiasm of these

provincial peasants. They were too holy to mingle with the mob, so they kept together by themselves and waited hopefully for some heresy or breach of their multitudinous precepts." And to their great delight Jesus gave them exactly what they wanted!

The second group of people was there for a totally different reason. Not to be critical or find some possible fault with what Jesus said or did, but simply to listen, and learn, and most of all experience the healing power of God in their lives.

They were the common folk — or as Maclaren called them, "*provincial peasants*" — humble, unassuming, and faith-filled people (as we shall see). Not always the most educated, nor up on all matters of appropriate social etiquette (as we soon discover)!

One group came to find fault with Jesus. The other came to receive godly instruction and grace to help them in their need. That atmosphere filters down into everything that happens in the text! So, with that behind us, let's move on to see some of the many, many things this passage has to teach us.

The **FIRST** comes to us in the last part of verse 17 where we read, "*And the power of the Lord was present to heal the sick.*" That is, people could sense or perceive—they could feel or discern that the power of the Holy Spirit was going to do something in their midst. Someone was going to get healed. They could sense the presence of God that strongly in the room!

Randy and I have spoken about this often. Sometimes you walk into the service and you can sense, before it even starts, that the presence of God is heavy in the sanctuary. You can feel it in the air. You can sense it in your spirit. God is present in a special way to minister, touch, heal, comfort, call, convert, or strengthen the faith and spirit's of His people.

There are few pastors who haven't noticed this. Sometimes it's because the pastor and people have been much in prayer regarding the service. Other times it's because the congregation comes with a sense of earnest expectation.

And still other times no one has done anything to "make it happen." God simply chooses, for reason's known only to Him, to bless His people with the grace of His manifest power and presence in a greater way than on other occasions.

In fact, there are those other occasions when you can't make it happen no matter how hard you try or pray or work to conjure it up — because it isn't you that makes it happen! It's the sovereign

prerogative of God who simply chooses to come on some occasions with immense power and glory and a grace that is so heavy in the air that you can feel it.

That's what happens in revival — the Holy Spirit (who is always present at all times and in all places) for some reason chooses to make that presence known in an unusually intense, tangible, felt way that doesn't lift for hours, weeks or months on end.

Rev. White, minister of the First Parish Church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, records the events that took place in March of 1742 (in the midst of the First Great awakening):

"The first, most visible and powerful effusion of the (Holy) Spirit was on the last Sabbath in January of 1742... As I was preaching in the afternoon and in the evening, in two religious societies (by) the harbor, many were impressed with distress and with joy above measure. And on Monday morning, in the school of Mr. Moses Parsons (being hired by a number of gentlemen to train up their children in religious exercises) the Spirit of God came so powerfully upon the school that they could not attend to the ordinary school exercises... In the evening, Mr. Parsons preached a lecture in the meeting house, and at the close of the exercise, the Spirit fell upon a great part of the congregation to the earnest amazement of many. People had such an appetite for the Word of God that Mr. Parsons called in the help of other ministers in the town (who preached the next night, and the night after and the night after that!)... They were all amazed, saying in their hearts, and to one another, 'What does this mean?' 'My eyes have never seen such transactions; my ears never heard such expressions'... As it was when the Holy Spirit was poured down in Acts chapter 2...thus it was with us. But the impression was at first principally on the one side of the meeting house (where) there was poured down a Spirit of prayer upon young and old, especially the younger sort. Children of five, six and seven would pray in admiration."

He preached for years with little recognizable effect. In 41 years of ministry the church in Gloucester had only grown from 68 to 260 members (less than 5 added to the church/year.) *"I fished with an angling-rod (or a fishing pole) and not a net,"* he says, until *"it pleased God, by His Spirit, to work kindly in a way of conviction and I trust, conversion"...* bringing in a *"great harvest of souls."*

All of a sudden, after 40 plus years of what he called God working in a *"more gentle and undiscernable way,"* the Holy Spirit, seemingly out of nowhere, evidenced His presence in great

power in March of 1742, and in such a dramatic way, that people couldn't help but sense that power and that holy presence moving mightily and mysteriously in their midst!

People began to labor under great conviction for their sins, pleading with God to save them, praying with great earnestness, filled with an inexpressible joy, consumed by a great love for all God's people and a burden for their unsaved friends that often drove them to weep and pray for them as they sat and listened to the Word preached. Children 5, 6, 7 years old bursting into audible prayer during the service in a way no one had ever heard before, and causing them to wonder what on earth was going on!

That, I believe, is the type of atmosphere Luke describes in our text for this morning when he says, ***"And the power of the Lord was present for Him to heal the sick."*** People could sense it! They could feel an uncanny power and invisible presence in that room. The omnipresent God who is everywhere present at all times had chosen on that day, and in that place, to make His presence known in a tangible, sensed, perceptual way that no one could miss.

And I say to you: How we need to pray for such blessed visitations of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, apart from whose sovereign working in the hearts and lives of people nothing of eternal significance will ever happen.

As I've said before (quoting Spurgeon): ***"We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity, unless the Holy Ghost be with the Word to give it power to convert the soul."***

Or I might add: ***Unless the Holy Spirit be present in power to heal the sick / soften hard hearts / convict of sin / transform the life / get people to forgive or believers to weep and pray for their unsaved friends / and get churches and ministers to work together instead of compete with each other*** (as in Gloucester where one minister called in other ministers to help meet the people's Spirit-spawned appetite for God's Word).

Then **SECOND**, into this spiritually charged powerhouse, come ***"Some men, carrying a paralytic on a mat (a pallet or stretcher as Mark puts it) trying to get him into the house to lay him before Jesus."*** And being unable to find a way to do this because of the size of the crowd, Luke says, ***"they went up on the roof, took off the tiles, and lowered him down (presumably using ropes) into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus."*** And then listen to what Luke says: ***"When Jesus saw their faith, He said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."***

What an awesome statement! Seeing ***"THEIR faith"*** (the faith of the man's friend's) he says to the man himself, ***"YOUR sins are forgiven."***

Think of it: Here you have a paralytic who is helpless to get himself into the presence of Jesus. He cannot do it himself! Left to himself he would never have been able to get to himself where he needed to be at that time in order to be healed. He was totally dependent upon the help and assistance of His friends.

And although there is no need for us to move or travel to some particular geographic location in order to come into the presence of a God who fills all time and space, it is nonetheless true that on occasion we do need to go, or be brought to a place where the Spirit, as in this text, is moving powerfully.

When Billy Graham came to Boston back in the mid-1980's we brought the youth group of our church, because it is true — although a person can come to Christ wherever they are, simply by trusting in Jesus to save them and casting the full weight of their lost soul on Him, being in a place or at an event bathed in prayer for months in advance, listening to the Gospel preached by a man who has the gift of evangelism, makes a difference!

Nancy and I still speak of sitting in the bus after the rally was over, and seeing a young girl from that youth group climb onto the bus with a peace and joy exuding from her face that made it seem like she was glowing or floating!

Likewise, we also need others to intervene on our behalf and bring us before Christ or the throne of grace in prayer, for help in our times of need. Because sometimes we, like that paralytic, are immobilized physically and our friends must intervene and pray the prayer of faith for us! Being unable to do so ourselves, we need our friends to storm the gates of heaven on our behalf. And when we do, God hears and answers! That's the beauty of being part of the Body of Christ!

At 19 years old, before I ever came to Christ, I was knocked unconscious for three days only to wake that third day to discover a slew of people had been praying for me.

A man from the Canadian Embassy in Honduras (an avid bicyclist) sped down a hill at 30 miles an hour, only to run head on into a truck coming the other way. The impact was so powerful it collapsed a lung and ruptured his spleen, and for a while we didn't know if he'd come through it.

Though an unbeliever, the alert went out and many church friends showed up at the hospital praying earnestly for him. In fact, just before they put him under, dazed and bruised as he was, I walked over to the gurney he was laying on, placed my hand on his shoulder, leaned over and

whispered a prayer in his ear. He did lose his spleen, but recovered miraculously, confessing later on that one of the things that got him through was hearing all those people praying (he even said that in the foggy state of mind he was in, he thought my prayer was an angel speaking to him)!

And it's not just times when we're physically incapacitated or mentally impaired. Sometimes we go through spiritual struggles so intense, and are assailed by doubts so strong, that faith wanes or seems like it has disappeared entirely, and along with it all ability to feel or sense the nearness or closeness of God's presence, and sometimes even the desire to pray.

At such times we need our Christian friends to exercise faith on our behalf — because we ourselves have little or none to exercise / like Job after his trials carried on and on / or like Paul in II Cor. 1, Acts 27:20, when the storm rages on and he and all his friends "gave up all hope of being saved." At such times we need our friends to carry us through, exercising their faith and their prayers on our behalf.

You see, we sometimes forget what this text teaches — that Jesus, seeing **THEIR** faith, forgave and healed **THE MAN** that they carried into His presence.

Don't ever think that your faith or your prayers exercised on behalf of others don't matter! They do! We are called to a ministry of intercession — this passage being a representation of that truth.

And what else can we say? We can say it's not just their faith that Jesus honored, it was their bold, committed, determined, sacrificial, do whatever it takes **LOVE** for their friend that Jesus honored as well. After all, who can read this passage and not see that this man's friends didn't merely have faith, they evidenced a love far beyond what many of us have ever evidenced. A love that would stop at nothing, sacrifice anything, and could care less what others might think of them as a result!

Again, a little background helps. R. Kent Hughes, in his Commentary on Luke writes: "*The typical roof of that day consisted of timbers laid parallel to each other about two or three feet apart. Sticks were closely laid crosswise upon the timbers, and the structure was padded with reeds, thistles and twigs. The whole thing was then overlaid with about a foot of earth, which was packed down to minimize leakage... The friends had their work cut out for them — they were performing a mini-excavation.*"

So picture it: Here is Jesus teaching inside this house, when all of a sudden they begin to hear a scratching or shoveling sound on the roof, followed shortly thereafter by debris falling on those inside! Dirt, twigs, and dust — possibly even chunk's of dried mud!

And as people gaze up at the roof (wondering what the heck is going on!), three or four *“sweaty, impish, determined faces,”* as Hughes puts it, peer down through the hole, and begin to lower their friend down in front of the Jesus they have just so rudely interrupted — their love stopping at nothing to get their friend into the presence of Jesus!

A love that would endure the displeasure and angry scowls of all those religious big wigs / insulted and possibly coughing from the dust in the air / pulling the mud and twigs out of their hair / and bushing the dirt from their fancy robes! / A love that would require them to come back later and repair the roof — which was no small job — costing them significant amounts of time, labor and finances to fix, or pay someone to fix — since it was they who ruined the roof.

It's enough to make us pause and ask ourselves if we love people that much — If we'd do whatever it takes, or pay whatever cost is necessary in terms of the time, and the labor and the money needed to bring people into the presence of Jesus?

Do we love others so much we'd be willing to endure the scorn of others who may think that our actions are a bit fanatical / our methods a bit overly-zealous / our regard for social etiquette a bit lacking / and our relentless determination to bring people to Jesus a bit extreme.

Jesus, it appears, approves of such love. No rebuke. No, “What are you doing interrupting my teaching session?” No, “How dare you ruin this man's roof?” No, “How rude!” Rather, He affirms and approves of their extreme expression of love for their friend.

And that's not all. It was not just a faith fueled by love that Jesus approved of, but a faith full of **CONVICTION**. LISTEN: Anyone can say they believe Jesus can heal. Anyone, that is, can give mental or verbal assent to some biblical precept. But NO ONE tears off roofs, or break through all barriers, or “Lets no obstacle stand in the way of their bringing people to Jesus,” unless they are convinced that the Gospel is true, and that Jesus and Jesus alone can touch, heal, save and transform one's life.

You see, these friends didn't just “believe.” They were convinced beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus was this man's only hope! And as Hughes so insightfully points out again, *“When a Christian believes Jesus is the only way, he or she will go to great lengths to encourage his*

or her friends to come to Jesus... The importance of the conviction that Jesus is the only way cannot be overstated. It is the key to removing roof's — in regard to missions — to evangelism — to the Gospel itself."

The problem is that though we often say we believe, we really don't. That is, we're not convinced — which means there's a sense in which we don't really believe Jesus — when He says in John 14:7: *"I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father but through me."*

I've heard so many people delve into philosophical relativism to explain away that text, or the words of Peter when he said in Acts 4:12, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name, under heaven, given among men by which we must be saved."*

And many have likewise tried to get around the words of Paul when he says in Rom. 9:2-4: *"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel."*

You see, if we really believed it with all our hearts, and our faith wasn't just verbal assent to some principle, but actually solidified in the soul with great conviction, we'd stop at nothing and let nothing keep us from seeking to bring others to Jesus.

In fact, we'd stop using our energies to make such texts more relative, and use them instead to brainstorm and discover CREATIVE WAYS to bring people to Jesus.

You can almost picture it, can't you? These men arriving at the house only to discover they can't get their friend anywhere near Jesus. Yet convinced that Jesus is his only hope if he's ever to walk again, their brains start spinning! *"Let's see...the door is blocked, how about a window? No, they're blocked by crowds of people looking in as well. What can we do?"* Then it hits them! *"No one's on the roof! We'll tear the roof open and lower him down!"*

Faith, when compelled by LOVE, and fueled in the soul by CONVICTION, will ALWAYS find CREATIVE WAYS to get past any roadblock! ALWAYS! It's only our lack of love, and our lack of conviction (brought about by the church's adoption of philosophical relativism) that had led to a lack of creativity when it comes to figuring out ways to overcome any apparent obstacle in our quest (better yet, our divinely given commission) to bring people to Jesus.

And then LAST, I couldn't end without pointing out that such faith, and such determined love, and such creativity, fueled by the inner conviction that Jesus is the sinner's only hope, always receives more than it expected or came to Christ seeking.

All they wanted, from what we can tell, was for Jesus to heal their friend's paralysis so that he could walk again. But their friend received far more! He not only left that place walking on his own two feet, He left that place with all his sins forgiven.

He came for a lesser gift (a lesser grace), and left with the greatest of all gifts — sins pardoned. A conscience freed from the blight of guilt! A soul that liberated from the chains and memories of past failures and transgressions. His slate wiped clean, a new start on life, and the grace of being put right with God.

That was his greatest need, and the most valuable gift. After all, healing the man cost Jesus a few simple words spoken over him, but forgiving the man would cost Jesus His life! What the man received freely, Jesus paid for dearly.

And can I say to you, that if God were to give you any other gift, but withhold that gift, He would be keeping from you the greatest gift of all.

But He doesn't. Because what He wants us to know — what this text shows us — is that when we come to Jesus in faith, He may deal with our other needs first, but sooner or later He will get to our greatest need — our need for pardon, reconciliation with God, and the forgiveness of every sin we have ever committed.

We often come to Him for one thing, but we get far more than we ever bargained for! We came wanting to get rid of depression, we got that plus the forgiveness of our sins... plus adoption into the family of God, plus the gift of the Holy Spirit, plus a new heart and a new spirit, plus deliverance from the dominion of sin, plus.....!!!!

That's what Jesus wants us to know. No one comes to Jesus with totally pure or completely right and altruistic motivations. It just doesn't happen! And thus Jesus, by His grace, will often give us what we really need, rather than what we came for—or both, much to our surprise!