

That Time the Roof Crumbled
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Mark 2:1-12

In my former congregation, there was an older woman named Kitty. Her mind was sharp as a tack, and she had a lively, energetic spirit and a great sense of humor. Her only problem was that her body wasn't always able to keep up with her keen mind. She suffered from severe arthritis in her legs and back. Her spine was twisted. Kitty was vision impaired and hard of hearing.

Yet, every week--if she was able--she was at Sunday worship. Kitty always seemed to have an entourage, a group of two or three people who would sit with her and her husband during the service. More often than not, she'd fall asleep halfway through the sermon.

But every Sunday when we'd get to the Lord's Prayer, whoever was sitting next to her would lean over and whisper the words into her ear: *Our Father, who art in heaven...* and Kitty would perk up and continue the rest of the prayer before falling asleep again.

If a favorite hymn was played, her husband would open the hymnal and place it in her hand. At coffee hour, another friend would help her wipe the cookie crumbs from her face or carry her coffee as she made her way across the room using her walker.

What impressed me the most about Kitty, though, was her dedication to the wider church. For many years she and her husband Richard served as Fairfield East delegates, bringing back news and information about our sister congregations. For someone who physically struggled as much as she did, Kitty's grit and determination and desire to serve were admirable.

Kitty couldn't have done these things on her own, and yet, she never seemed to be in need of help... because of how the people she loved cared for her so well. Her life was an example of the kind of devotion we hear in this week's reading.

The crowd had gathered expecting something big to happen.

They didn't know exactly who he was, but they had heard some things:

"Local boy - grew up down the street."

"Fine preacher! Lovely voice. Speaks with authority!"

"They say he touched a man's shoulder one time, and that man was immediately healed!"

The gospel as has been preaching is so compelling that people would do anything to gain access to him.

When religion makes the gospel boring, shame on us. Because the message of Jesus is anything but boring.

The people who are drawn to it, though, don't always like what they hear. It infuriates some of them. He's accused of being blasphemous. His choice of companions is criticized. The fact that he heals people is criticized.

He gets put on religious watch lists that will eventually lead to his crucifixion as a criminal of the state.

The gospel is compelling. The gospel is healing. The gospel is saving.

The gospel is not safe.

But then it happened. As the words fell from his mouth, little flecks of dust began to fall from the ceiling. Then some tiles here and there. Long splinters of wood and big, slate shingles...until, finally, sunlight was streaming through a gaping hole!

Part of the roof had crumbled into rubble around them. When the crowd looked up to see the source of the interruption, they saw four men begin to lower a paralyzed man, slowly, slowly, slowly, right into the middle of the room for all to see.

I heard a story about Wynton Marsalis, the great jazz trumpeter.

He was playing a gig one night; and in the middle of one of his songs, someone's cell phone started to ring. If he was annoyed about it, he didn't show it. Instead, Wynton began playing the ring tone on his trumpet, didn't miss a beat. Eventually he resolved back into the original melody, making the interruption part of his song.

And that's just what Jesus did; he turned the interruption into part of his message. He's describing to them what the kingdom of God looks like, trying to get them to understand that it's the ones you don't expect who may be the most in need.

And, we're told; all who saw it were amazed and glorified God. Except for those who were threatened by Jesus' message of inclusion.

There's a saying in leadership that successful leadership is disappointing people at a pace they can tolerate.

And in this passage, maybe in Mark's gospel in general, Jesus seems to be pushing that pace. If you read ahead you can almost hear him as he continues to push the envelope...

Don't like me healing someone and forgiving sins? How about I add a TAX COLLECTOR to my group of disciples?

Don't like that much? How about I have dinner at his house with even more tax collectors and sinners, maybe even a prostitute or two?

Does that offend you too? How about I don't have my disciples fast and carry on with the traditions that you think are essential? What then?

See what I mean? Jesus is disappointing people at an immediate, breakneck pace. But there's something about God's Good News that does that. It made the scribes who were there to witness it very uncomfortable; and launched the beginning of a controversy that would eventually do him in.

The longer I'm on this faith journey, the more I'm reminded that it's about disruption, and roof and barrier removal, and disappointing people at a pace they can't quite tolerate.

I've also discovered the things that seem disruptive to some people seem to be just like another day to someone else. In other words, we aren't called to just go disrupt. We are called to do the work of the gospel and then deal with the disruption when it happens.

Disruption isn't the goal of our faith. It is the consequence.

A professor at Wheaton College in Illinois is facing a disruption in her life... perhaps you have heard of it? To show support to Muslims facing discrimination, Dr. Larycia Hawkins wore a head scarf and claimed solidarity with Muslims because, like Christians, they are people of the Book, and because we worship the same God.

This is not a particularly disrupting claim. Most mainline Christians would make the same claim. Despite our differences, we recognize that Islam is also a religion that grew out of some of the same scriptures we read. They claim Abraham as an ancestor through his son Ishmael. The Pope even made a similar claim recently.

Yet Wheaton College, a Christian College is now firing her, a tenured professor, on charges of apostasy. She has said she is flabbergasted at what has happened.

"Our love for Jesus compels us to make no peace with oppression because Christianity is political or it is not Christianity. That drove my solidarity with women in the hijab, particularly Muslims in the hijab—because you know, Jesus' mother Mary wore a hijab too."

She has said she will not change her message to save her job. From her statement this week:

"Students, colleagues, friends, you inspire me to embody love of God, neighbor, and self. This is the sum of the law and the prophets. I can do no less than live Jesus' politics. Friends far and near, let's continue to walk in the truth of our common humanity. I believe that Jesus is Justice. And I will continue to walk in that justice."

When she put on that head scarf and made her statement, when she started pulling the shingles off the roof, all she was trying to do was show solidarity to people who were facing exclusion, trying to remove the barriers that would keep them from God's hope for their flourishing.

It was a bigger disruption than she expected.

What other roofs are waiting to be dismantled as your faith leads you to remove the barriers that keep people from God's love, God's presence, God's healing?

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, the day in the church calendar when we mark the magi's journey to follow the Star that led them to Jesus. And I think the journey of the four friends is epiphany-like. They were following something too, seeking the bright star of Jesus, and they wanted to bring their friend along and make sure he could see it as well.

Maybe our Epiphany journey this year is less about us trying to see Jesus and more about making sure others have access to see him. Let's tear apart those roofs that are in the way. Jesus is on the other side of the barriers. Amen.