

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
The Proof Is in the Pudding
 Luke 5:17 – 26

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A few years ago, I went on a rather unique hospital visit. I went to visit Rick and Tammie Mark's granddaughter, Maddie. Rick and Tammie are very proud grandparents, and I'm sure you can see why! **(picture)**

Since I was visiting a little one, it seemed apropos to bring a children's Bible with me. When I arrived, Maddie was perfectly content being with Grammie Tammie, so I listened to all of the fun they had had, painting, getting ready for Halloween, and decorating her room. After a while, I asked if she would like to say a prayer together and hear a Bible story. She looked curious, so I showed her the children's Bible. **(picture)** She took one look and said, "Aww, it's cute! Let's read a story!"

And the story we read was our Gospel lesson from Luke 5. Since then, this story has been extra special to me. And whether a children's version or a regular version, it is a special and powerful story! (The adult one just might not be as cute.)

Allow me set the scene. Jesus is in a home, teaching. Religious leaders are gathered around. They have come from all over Israel and *specifically* the religious center, Jerusalem. It is *so* packed in the house, that not even *men on a mission* can fit through! These men are *determined* and will *not* be deterred! They don't want to wait to get their friend to Jesus; he needs to be seen *now*! Their friend *cannot* remain as he has been one minute longer! They can't get in through the front, so they come up with a creative solution. What if they open up

the roof and *lower* their friend down?! There is speculation that this may have been the owner's house, because it would have been pretty unlikely for a *guest* to tear up someone else's home! Guest or no guest, these men *rip* open the roof because their friend needs Jesus, and they know, deep in their bones, that Jesus won't turn them away. Jesus will see their friend and will love him. Jesus will heal him, and he won't be disappointed. He needs Jesus, so his friends *tear open* the roof.

In our four-week sermon series, we are coming out of hibernation – together. We have slowly been phasing back in – as a society and as a church. We have gathered in small groups outside. We have gathered in smaller worship gatherings outside. We have hugged family members and close friends. Some of us have shifted our work from virtual to in-person. We have trickled our way back inside for worship – still with masks and distancing and minus the coffee and treats after worship services. Things are still not as they were, and we have been told in many and various ways that they *won't* return as they were. But we are beginning to come out of hibernation. **(picture)**

Comparing ourselves to bears is really not too great a stretch. It seems apropos really, and maybe kind of cute! Grizzly bears go into hibernation because of scarcity, because food sources will be insufficient to survive the winter. Hibernation is necessary. For a time. But they don't hibernate forever. Eventually, pheromones from blooming plants are released into the air, and bears begin to rouse. It's time to come out. First males, then solitary females, and finally females with cubs. **(picture)** When they surface, they're lethargic and aren't very hungry. They don't eat much, and they look for easy food sources. They're like this for a week or two.

Grizzlies emerge, *not* because life has returned to normal, but because they can smell food! Life *outside* the den is more attractive than life *inside* the den, and their slow exit has given them opportunity to trust their instincts. The proof is in the pudding.

After a long season of hibernation, it's only natural to take time to trust your instincts, to be slow. It's important to know that we can be safe, and that what is *outside* our den is better than what is *inside* our den.

With the *novel* coronavirus and evolving science, it's been very difficult to know how much hibernation has been necessary. Over time, we've learned a lot about what is more and less safe, and many of us have felt increased confidence in the vaccine. Praise God for scientists and epidemiologists!

What we knew from the beginning, however, is that we can hibernate for a season, but we can't hibernate forever. As soon as it's safe, we *need* to come out of hibernation. We need to leave the den and enter back into relationships with others and with this world. We need to get our paws dirty, and as Pastor Jim preached last Sunday from Jeremiah 29, to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" to which we have been called. To plant gardens, to dwell in the land and to "pray to the Lord for it" (Jer 29:7).

There are many sobering realities this season has taught us, and one of those realities is *how critical* it is to be in relationship with others. We were *not* created to be lone wolves. We instinctually know this, and science reveals that it's true.

In the 1980s and 1990s, thousands of children were orphaned in Romania and studied. They exhibited "impaired growth and cognitive development, as well as an elevated incidence

of serious infections and attachment disorders.”¹ Charles Nelson, a professor of pediatrics at Harvard, visited the orphanages, and saw “children in cribs rocking back and forth...He...saw toddlers desperate for attention.” He said, ““They’d reach their arms out as though...saying to you, ‘Please pick me up...’ So you’d pick them up and they’d hug you. But then they’d push you away and they’d want to get down. And then the minute they got down they’d want to be picked up again. It [was] a very disorganized way of interacting with somebody.”” As Nelson continued his studies, he found a “dramatic reduction” in the gray and white matter of their brains, meaning ““their brains were actually physically smaller.”” And “the cause wasn’t...as simple as malnutrition. It was a different kind of deprivation – the [deprivation] of a parent, or someone who acted like a parent.”²

We were created to be in relationship with others. *I* need it. *You* need it. *We* need it. *They* need it. *Everyone* needs to be in relationship, no matter how young, how old, or how strong and independent we may feel we are. Life is better outside the den. And the proof is in the pudding.

In our Gospel text today, we hear a *powerful* story about relationship. Determined friends *rip open* a roof to get their friend to Jesus. They know that Jesus has the power to heal, and they are confident that Jesus will heal their friend. Their friend is paralyzed, and has been “excluded from full participation in the community,”³ counted and treated as “less than.” If other biblical narratives are any indication, society likely blamed him for his paralysis.

¹ www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

² www.npr.org

³ Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 239.

It was time for healing. He knew it. His friends knew it. And he was lowered *through the roof* so that Jesus could heal him.

Jesus recognizes their faith, and does something remarkable in verse 20. Take a look. He says, **(verse)** “Friend, your sins are forgiven.” Jesus sees that this man cannot walk, but interestingly doesn’t speak to his paralysis; he speaks to something deeper. Jesus speaks to the man’s *relationships*. He calls him “friend.”

The man is on the *inside* now. He is a friend of Jesus. And everyone knows it. The religious leaders who have gathered from all over Israel, hear his name. This man is a friend of Jesus. He is elevated to Jesus’ social status. And then Jesus speaks the words, “Your sins are forgiven” (Lk 5:20b).

This man and his friends were *desperate* for him to be healed, and boy was he healed! He was healed in his relationship with society and with God. And in those words of relational healing, Jesus healed his body too.

This is the vision God has for you and for all of creation – healed relationships with one another, with God, and with creation. You were created to be in whole relationships. That is God’s vision, and that is how life will one day be. Because you *weren’t* a mistake. You *weren’t* an afterthought. You are a child and friend of God, created for good, created to give glory to God.

In the adult version of Luke 5, there is one more dimension to the story. There’s an antagonist – or a group of antagonists. And sadly, these antagonists are the religious leaders, the ones who have spent their lives seeking to know and to be obedient to the scriptures. But when God’s Son is in their midst, they don’t see him, and get angry instead.

It's easy and natural to be proud, to believe we are right, to believe that we have the corner on God and how God does and does not work. And please know that I am including myself in this "we!" If it doesn't meet our expectation or the box we have made for God, we can miss how the Spirit is active in the world, even when it's right in front of our faces!

So how do we *not* miss how the Spirit is active in the world? How do we recognize what God is doing? First, **(line)** we need to know what God desires, and then **(line)** we look for how God is bringing His desire about. And how do we know what God desires? We look to Scripture. When we look to Scripture, we recognize that God is on a mission to reconcile everything to Himself. Or, as Bishop Dan would say, the first three chapters are about God's creation and its fall, and the rest is about God's plan to restore it. God's intention is to restore – to restore relationships with one another, with God, and with creation. God's desire, God's purpose, is restoration.

We are entering a new and very interesting season. As we and many around us are coming out of hibernation, we know that we are *desperate* for relationship. We are *desperate* for relationships with God and with one another. We are *desperate* for that which we were created.

And those who have *not* been a part of the church will look for evidence to see if the church is a place for relationship. A place *never* considered will become a place of *intrigue*.

We have the opportunity to be friends who bring people to the feet of Jesus, and we have the opportunity to be antagonists who close our hearts to the work of God.

About a year ago, we had a conversation as a staff. We were talking about our church culture. We asked questions like, *How welcoming are we? How comfortable do people feel*

when they visit us? After a long conversation, we concluded that we are like coconuts **(picture)** – hard on the outside but soft on the inside. Hard on the outside, meaning we may not seem friendly or glad when new people come to visit us. But soft on the inside, meaning once we get to know you, we are good friends to have. What we concluded probably isn't a surprise to you. We're coconuts. Let's admit it. There is good stuff in the middle, but sometimes it's difficult to access. And sometimes we are too late to show the good stuff in the middle; our guests have already left.

We can do better. There are so many wonderful people at St. Timothy's. You're probably here because of them. You know their stories. You know God is alive and at work in them. You *are* them. You know that God is alive and active in St. Timothy's.

It's time to pray for God to shape our church culture so that we don't have such a hard shell. We are coming out of hibernation, and God is doing a *new thing* in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors. God is at work, healing relationships, and we have the great challenge and invitation to be a part of that healing work in the world.

May our life together be evidence of God's healing in the world, that God is doing a *new thing*, in and among us. Amen.