



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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Four Friends, Six Sisters, and a Bearded Lady (Hope Restored)

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**M**ark 2:1 When He returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home.

Mark 2:2 So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.

Mark 2:3 Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.

Mark 2:4 And when they could not bring Him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay.

Mark 2:5 When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Mark 2:6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts,

Mark 2:7 "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Mark 2:8 At once Jesus perceived in His spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and He said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?"

Mark 2:9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'?

Mark 2:10 But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—He said to the paralytic—

Mark 2:11 "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."

Mark 2:12 And He stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

We continue our series on Hope Restored as we walk through the Gospel of Mark. I have always felt that the Christian faith is basically about two things: a deep friendship with Jesus, and deep friendships with others. Simply that. Actually, a healthy mature life doesn't mean you need tons of friends — just some really good mature ones. Just a few good friends. Real good friends.

Prov. 18:24 Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin.

Prov. 27:10 Do not forsake your friend or the friend of your parent;

How can the church be a springboard for finding friends and nurturing friendship?

*The Greatest Showman* is an interesting movie. I like it as a metaphor and not as history. Here is the metaphor: In the movie, the famous circus promoter and entrepreneur P.T. Barnum gives a circus career to what people back then and maybe some today would call "freaks"—

a bearded lady, a dog-faced man, an albino, a very short man he called Tom Thumb, a seven-foot man, and Siamese Twins, two brothers connected in the chest.

These were real people. They were seen as outcasts of society. But in the movie, they find community in P.T. Barnum's circus because everyone there is different. Everyone's an outcast, and so the circus becomes their family.

The film made me think of all of the unusual people in the Bible, those who were different, whom Jesus met and liked and loved:

- The woman who was bleeding for 12 years whom society called unclean. She was an outcast, but Jesus showed her compassion.
- The woman at the well who was promiscuous, a fornicator, and had several husbands. She went to the well at noon because she knew no one would be there. She was an outcast, but Jesus showed her compassion.
- The lepers who were jeered for being unclean because of their disease. They were outcasts for life, but Jesus showed them compassion.
- The man with a legion of demons inside of him, who hit himself, and who howled all night. He was an outcast but Jesus showed him compassion.
- The adulterous woman who was about to be stoned, but Jesus stood up for her in a circle of angry men.

**H**e showed her compassion by saying, “How dare you cast a stone at an outcast unless you yourself have no sin and are perfect!” That’s our Jesus! You go, Lord, as He is the one who says, “You go, girl for I condemn you not.”

Can the Church, our church, always be a community where those considered as different—the failures, the freaks, and outcasts—might find community?

I want to show you a scene from *The Greatest Showman*, and here’s the context: The circus performers, who are outcasts, attend a theater concert that PT Barnum is producing. It’s a beautiful, ornate theater. But they are outcasts. The British rich, the upper crust of society, don’t like them. Since childhood these performers have been rejected. And now the rejection continues. Biting. Cutting.

The scene begins in a concert hall where a door is literally shut in their faces, meaning stay out. So the bearded lady begins to sing of her frustration and hurt. She leads them through the concert hall and then out towards the back to the circus, where people have gathered to protest their presence, the same people who have jeered them and physically beaten them and put their lives in danger.

And they march back to the circus – back to where they have community ...and where actually, for some strange reason, the audience can accept them there.

Let’s look at this scene which is the same song that recently won a *Golden Globe* for Best Song in a Movie, and I predict will win best song for the Oscars next month. Here is the song called *This Is Me* sung by Kahuku High School grad Keala Settle, and you can also watch this on Youtube. (Music video was shown.)

In a sense we are all freaks. We don’t really fit in society, if we are true followers of Jesus.

And for many of us we have been outcast since childhood – we may not have been part of the cool crowd, or we just have

had different ideas or looked different. We didn’t fit in.

The ideal church is a place where we accept everyone. No matter our past, our sexual orientation, our ethnicity, or our social class. A church should be a place for all who know they need a hospital and a family. We offer community, acceptance, and yes, rehabilitation. Rehabilitation. That’s a good word. We all need rehabilitation from those who have sinned against us and for those we have sinned against.

There is a great line in *The Greatest Showman*. The great circus promoter P.T. Barnum is trying to be world famous, a big celebrity whom everyone adores, and where everyone is his so-called friend. But his wife Charity says to him, “You don’t need the whole world to love you. Just a few good people.”

It’s my favorite line in the movie.

We weren’t born to be celebrities or be popular because it will go to our heads. We don’t need tons of friends, and especially not surface ones. We need just a FEW good people, maybe just enough to carry our casket when our life is over. Maybe all we need are just FOUR good friends.

And that brings us to our passage in the gospel of Mark. Here’s a paralytic who’s maybe an outcast all his life. He cannot play sports. He can only watch. (At a nearby school, I’ve seen a girl in a wheel chair at a basketball court during P.E., and she can’t play basketball, volleyball, baseball like her classmates. Few talk to her as she watches by the sidelines. I feel for her.)

For this paralytic maybe he doesn’t have a lot of friends who talk to him. Worse yet he lived in an ancient society that believed if you are sick, it might be because of your sin. It’s like rubbing salt into a wound.

But the passage says he has four friends, four spiritual friends. Why spiritual? It’s

because they say, “We are going to get him to Jesus no matter what.” They are thinking spiritually and as friends.

There are two ways to look at how these friends got involved in this story. One could be that the paralytic pleaded with them that he had heard that Jesus is nearby and that He heals and if they could please take him to see Jesus. And maybe the friends said, “What? Who is Jesus? No way. He might be a weirdo. He’s just a rabbi.” And maybe the paralytic pleaded and cajoled and persuaded them to finally take him to see Jesus.

Or maybe it was the four friends who came to him and said, “Hey, buddy, we hear this Jesus guy is in town. We are here to take you to Him.” And maybe the paralytic said, “No, how embarrassing! No, leave me alone. Let me remain a paralytic.” As Chris said last week, he maximized his pain as if to say, “My situation is so great that not even God could help.” But the friends did a spiritual intervention and said, “No, you are coming with us.”

Or maybe they all five were in agreement and said, “Let’s go to see Jesus!”

The Bible says these four friends had faith, and so it was more like the second or third scenario.

But putting aside speculation, this we do know: These four friends are with this paralyzed friend. They are not going to abandon their friend. They hope for him. They want him healed. They share in his pain and illness. They don’t care if he is different. They don’t care if it is embarrassing. They don’t care if they will need to do crazy things, like bashing a hole in the roof and that they might get charged for damaging a house. They will not be stopped. They will help their friend at all cost. They will be creative, entrepreneurial, bold, daring, courageous and crazy passionate to help a friend get to Jesus. They are great friends.

**A**nd get this: Since their friend is paralyzed, there is nothing he can DO for them. There is no way he can repay them with deeds of gratitude. But they are going to help him anyway.

Imagine you are there in the scene in Mark. Our Bible text says these four friends and the paralytic arrive at a home where Jesus Himself is staying. Seeing that there are so many people there they push their way through the crowd. The whole town is there. They are not going to be stopped.

They finally push their way to the front door, but the house is packed and they see they couldn't make their way inside. They see that there is no way. Maybe then one of the four, a creative geeky one who is called MacGyver–Stein says, “Hey, there’s a rope there. I got an idea. Trust me; let’s head for the roof.”

As ancient Palestinian homes often had side stairs, they take the stairs and go up to the top of the roof. And then they start to pull off the thatched roof. And then with their hands, or maybe after finding a tool or two, they try to dig a hole through the clay roof mixed with straw.

Meanwhile, inside the dust and clay start falling on people. The Bible text says Jesus is teaching, but then surely He stops and everyone looks up and sees these four guys who are trying to dig a hole big enough to lower a man on a stretcher. Maybe some people are yelling at them “Hey, what do you think you are doing?”

Friends of the owner of the house might be rushing up the stairs trying to stop them. And the text says this is Jesus’ home in Capernaum. The audacity, the chutzpah to do this! More and more dust and chunks of clay and straw start falling onto people on that perhaps hot Middle Eastern day, with dust now sticking to their sweaty faces.

And then, what a sight! The four friends start lowering their friend down into the house through a huge hole. Imagine how

they had to have enough rope to do that, and they had to make sure they lowered their friend evenly. If they lowered him too low on one side, he could slip off onto Jesus. Conversations among the four friends could have been like: “Hey, too fast! Bring your side up. It’s not me; it’s you. Get your side up! Easy, not so fast.” Or maybe they tied him really tight and made him go down vertical. Maybe the paralytic was saying. “You guys, this is sooo embarrassing!”

They lower him all the way down right in front of Jesus. The four friends are now so proud of themselves at having gotten their friend to Jesus. It’s high fives, fist bumps, hands victoriously stretched out and now, yes, the big moment! Now Jesus is going to heal their friend. Go ahead, Jesus, say the words “You are healed!”

Then perhaps Jesus gets up from sitting and goes up to their paralyzed friend and says, “Your sins are forgiven.”

Say what? The four friends are shocked. “What? What the heck! Your sins are forgiven? Your sins are forgiven?! Hey, we brought him to be healed. What’s this ‘sins are forgiven’ stuff? Hey guys pull him back up. We made a mistake. MacGyver–Stein, pull the rope up!”

And then to make matters worse, these really religious people called the Scribes, who devote their lives to writing religious laws and making people stick to obeying them, object to Jesus’ claim that He can forgive sins.

Then Jesus brilliantly asks, “Which is harder to do: forgive sins or heal someone? But so you might know that I really do have the authority to forgive sins, I am going to heal this man.” And boom! He heals the man supernaturally.

Right as the Gospel of Mark begins in the second chapter comes this explosive story where Mark makes it really clear that Jesus can heal and can forgive sins, which means He is God. He also makes it clear that the forgiveness of sins is

greater than just healing. We all have sins that need to be forgiven due to our sinful nature. And here’s a paralyzed man who cannot do anything, and yet he needs his sins to be forgiven too.

Boom! Dynamite! Having forgiveness of sins is huge! Actually, it’s the biggest miracle. It means eternal life, a place in heaven and a spiritual healing far greater than physical healing. It’s a huge cosmic miracle that God would go to a cross so that our sins would be forgiven by His sacrifice for us.

But what REALLY impressed Jesus in this whole episode is what it says in verse 5:

*Mark 2:5 When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”*

He noticed and was impressed with their faith! Not their boldness or creativity or courage or passion, but their faith! The friends had the FAITH that if they got their paralyzed friend to Jesus, Jesus would make a difference. They believed in Jesus and that He would be a friend.

The Christian faith is about spiritual friendship – a friendship with and trust in Jesus, and a friendship with others. Take-away question for us today: Can we be like those four friends? Not that you bash holes in ceilings, but at what cost are we passionate enough to get our friends to Jesus? Maybe our friends or ourselves have led lives of Siamese Twins of indecision; or lives that are too short in self-esteem; lives that believe we are flawed in appearance; lives bearded with doubt; or lives tattooed with old recordings of self-hate. What is stopping us from bringing our friends to Jesus?

And for ourselves, we don’t need the whole world to love us. Just a few – four good friends—who believe in us. Have we invested in enough friends to carry our casket?

**T**hat is partially why we have church small groups, *Rooted* and *Samson* groups, *Alpha* and *fellowship* groups, and *Impact* groups that are trying to build friendships. Can we find people, four good friends, to hang out with and know and be known? Sometimes we don't want to hang out with people, but God calls us to do that, no matter what tragedies or setbacks we may have.

To that point I want to tell you a related and remarkable story of not four friends but of six sisters that I heard a while back on the podcast called *The Moth*. Mary Kate O'Flanagan is one of six sisters who buried their dad in Ireland. She said, "Our parents gave us everything we needed – us, six sisters." But it all changed when their dad died unexpectedly. He was really fit even though he was 74.

She said, "If there is one thing we Irish do well is funerals."

When Americans hear your loved ones died, they say, "You have my condolences," or "I'm sorry for your trouble." But the Irish don't say that. Do you know what the Irish say? "I'm standing with you." And they mean it.

Mary Kate O'Flanagan said, "The Irish make food for an army, and then an army shows up for a multi-day wake to sit with us and pray with us and tell stories about the deceased and eat and drink." Maybe similar to the Filipino culture and other cultures.

Finally, at the end of Mary's father's wake, the undertaker came and said to the six daughters, "We need to know who are the six men who are going to carry your father's coffin."

The sisters said, "Well, there are six of us."

The undertaker asked, "You mean your husbands then?"

"No, we mean WE will."

The undertaker said, "The coffin is really heavier than you think and unwieldy. Better if the men do it."

But a sister said, "No, we will do it for our father."

He asked, "How about we wheel the coffin along and you walk with him like a guard of honor?"

"No!" said one of the sisters, "He will be carried *shoulder high* and by us!"

Mary Kate said their father wasn't that heavy. He was not a big man. There was nothing the six of them could not do together. But there was a problem. Big height disparity! Rachel and Rebecca are 5-foot tall; Olivia and Mary Kate are 5 foot 6 inches; and Sarah and Katherine are 5 foot 10 inches. But they managed it. Here's the picture of the six sisters carrying their father's coffin. (Picture of the six sisters was shown.)*[from themoth.org – "Carry Him Shoulder High by Mary Kate O'Flanagan, April 18 2017]*

From the house to the church and from the church to the graveyard they went. Mary Kate's aunt said, "For all of the great stories told, the best was watching you six strong women carrying your father to his rest."

But the source of their strength—their unity—was taken from them. Mary said that they were not emotionally strong women – each of them were in private grief. Without their dad, the bond between them was loosening. They kept crying. Incredibly the sisters AVOIDED each other and STOPPED talking to each other. All communication cut off for weeks and then months after months, until six months after their father's death through a very strange miracle.

One night Mary's sister Rebecca called Mary from a job from the other side of the world. Rebecca said, "You're at mom and dad's house, right? Can you check on dad's phone? Could you just check if someone is monkeying with his phone?"

Mary asked, "What's going on?" Rebecca said, "Just check!"

So, Mary found it; checked it. She got back on the phone and said, "I have it right here. It's dusty. No one has been near it. The battery is dead."

Silence on the phone.

Rebecca said, "I was at the hotel on the balcony last night, and I said, 'Dad, I can't go on; I can't go on if you don't exist anymore. I'm going to need a sign.'"

"This morning - my phone beeped. My phone had a message. I had one new message from dad."

Mary asked, "Dad sent you a message from beyond the grave?!!"

Rebecca read the text message, "I'm home now, Becs. You can call anytime you want."

Rebecca said, "It was the last message he had sent to me a while back. But now it was coming again. Do you think it was a sign?"

Mary exclaimed, "Do you have the audacity not to believe? You sent up a prayer and I dare you not to believe. May a plague of locusts get you next."

Rebecca asked, "What do we do now? What do we do now?"

Mary said, "We tell the others."

And so they did. By calling each of the sisters, Mary and her sisters began to talk to one another again. Their dad gave them what they needed—each other—to walk through the world again unafraid. They returned as a family.

And after their father's funeral, the six sisters saw their women friends carry the coffins of their menfolk because they were inspired.

To me that's the picture of the church.

**S**upernatural miracles, God hearing our pain and answering the prayers of our hearts. Sisters and brothers standing by each other, realizing we can't be in this world alone. We need to be friends, to make friends, and to stand by friends.

Whether it's six sisters carrying their father at the end of his journey or four friends carrying their paralyzed friend to Jesus – that's the church.

Sometimes when we lose a loved one, God does give us some unexpected humor to help us make it through.

Our dear friend Mike Pilavachi lost his mother three weeks ago on February 4. The funeral was two days ago.

One day he got a text message that said, "I am here for you."

Mike texted back, "Thanks I'm going through a tough time so it means a lot. And sorry, but I lost all my contacts. Who is this?"

The reply came back: "This is your Uber driver. I am here to pick you up."

"Oh," wrote Mike.

Then at the reception of the funeral of Mike's mom two days ago, Mike arrived at the banquet hall of the venue and was stunned to see the sign that read: "Funeral of Mike Pilavachi." Mike said he laughed and said his mum would have loved it.

In closing I want to share a story about friendship.

Many of you know that last weekend we lost our dear friend, our heroine, our organist, our pianist Beebe Freitas. She served this church for more than 40 years. I have known her for 38 years.

When her daughter Roslyn, our worship leader, called to let me know Beebe had passed, I was stunned. I knew she was

sick but I wasn't ready for her to die. I went over to Roslyn's house a couple of hours after Beebe died, and I went in and we sat. Mary Hicks and Dr. Don Fancher were there too.

Dr. Don said to Roz, "You are doing fine now but at some point it is really going to hit you like a punch in the stomach."

Roslyn said she understood that, and then turned to me, and asked, "How are you doing, Dan?"

I said, "I feel like I've been punched in the stomach." I was devastated. I have known Beebe for most of my life. And being in that home with all of the memories, I kept thinking of Beebe and the parties we have had there and the dinners we have had in other places and all of our adventures together, and I was wrecked. I hardly spoke. I was so sad. I felt like crying.

There I was, the so-called professional, who had come to Roz's house to encourage and comfort her, and maybe say something comforting and profound, but I had nothing to say. It wasn't that I just finished hours earlier two days of leading an Elders Retreat. No, grief took the wind out of my sails.

Mary was saying wonderful things and Don was saying wonderful things. But I just sat there speechless, listening. I did pray for Roz, and the words flowed, then but I was in shock.

Later, as I walked back to my car down a half block or so, I was saying, "Lord, I am the worst pastor in the world. I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything. I was going to cry. I felt horrible. I could have been a better friend to Roslyn. I could have said more words of encouragement."

And at that point, a thought came into my head, maybe it was from the Lord, but these kind words from a voice came and entered my mind, and the words were: "Ministry of presence. Dan, you offered the ministry of presence. You

were there, present and sat with her and grieved with her. You were a friend. You gave her a ministry of presence."

I apologized to Roslyn a couple days later that I was so shell-shocked that I didn't have much to say. She said, "It helped immensely that you were there."

The take-away from this sermon is that can we be a friend to others, and at least be present. Be present to listen, to empathize, to laugh or weep with, and sometimes try our best to carry them to Jesus to where the real healing happens. Maybe not just a physical healing but a healing of our hearts, a healing that we have always wanted for the forgiveness of our sins.

For a friendship with and for Jesus and with a few friends is all what we really need. This week, may we be a good friend. Amen? Amen.