

Sturdy Shelter

Luke 5:17-26

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My best friend; my life-long, childhood best-friend; my we-double-dated-to-prom-more-times-than-is-appropriate best friend... is the drummer for a Los Angeles-based alternative rock band. Did you know that?

Blake was the best man at mine and Christen's wedding. I made him get a haircut and shave for that event. Now, completely encumbered by my opinion, he's a heavily tattooed, hairy, drummer for a rock band, and when he plays, his dreadlocks look like they're moshing to the music.

When we were kids, I'd call him "Animal" from *The Muppets* – you know that furry, red, crazy-eyed drummer who couldn't resist beating his drums into oblivion every time he played. Today, I like to take some credit that Blake's Instagram username is *muppetanimal*.

I met Blake in fifth grade. I was brand new to the school and I was terrified. He saw me listening to my walkman, came over and asked who I was listening to. I told him Billy Joel – you know, the piano man. His face immediately lit up as he said, "I LOVE Billy Joel!" Billy Joel. We became instant best friends because of the piano man, and I wasn't scared anymore.

Several centuries ago, Ben Sira, the writer of the ancient book of wisdom, *Sirach*, wrote: "Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter..." (Sirach 6:14).

In that new school, where I didn't know anyone, felt completely out of place, and was scared more of the time than I wasn't, Blake became my sturdy shelter. It's something he has been for me many times over the years.

Blake would sometimes go to church with me at the Southern Baptist Church where I was raised, and make fun of me for going to one of those churches "with too much Holy Spirit and too much yelling" – BUT he also never missed the chance to invite me to his confirmation classes at the Lutheran Church, because he knew that I, as a Baptist, would know all the answers to the Bible questions. He like having "ringer" in his corner.

In middle school, we spent endless nights talking about girls, but never daring to actually talk *to* them. In high school, we sang in choir together and both made all-state our senior year. We were nearly inseparable.

Life has since taken us quite literally in different directions. About the time I was moving out to the east coast for seminary, he was trying to cram his drum kit into his Volkswagen Jetta and head out west to make it big as a rocker.

It's easy to be We haven't seen each other in a few years now. But he always seems to pop back into my life at the exact right moment that I need a friend. Take, for instance, March 19 of this year.

Exactly one week earlier, on March 12, I'd made the executive decision to close down the church in response to the coming coronavirus pandemic. The next week, the world ground to a halt.

I didn't know what I was doing. I still don't. Believe it or not, seminary did not prepare me for pastoring in a pandemic.

Immediately after I closed the church, I was so worried about it, about you and how you, my people, were holding up; about how this would effect the finances of our church; about how to not layoff staff; about who would fall through cracks. I didn't know how we were going to do worship or meet or get business done. Would this be the death of our congregation? I was so worried, that I couldn't sleep. I would lay in bed, stare at the ceiling, and play out the worst case scenarios in my head on a loop all night long.

A week into it, I was sleep deprived, I was emotionally compromised, I was questioning my abilities as a leader, I was feeling like a failure as a pastor, and I absolutely was no fun to be around. (Christen will be glad to confirm that last point.)

Then on the evening of March 19, out of the blue, while sitting on my couch, I got a text from my sturdy shelter: "Brother. Want to check in and see how y'all and your family are holding up?"

Nothing grand, nothing worth publishing, but I knew – I knew the moment that text rolled in that it would all be ok.

How is that genuine friends can do that for us? Could he feel my anxiety, my worry from a thousand miles away? How did my rock drummer best friend know that I needed to hear from him?

"Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter" (Sirach 6:14).

Today is Praise Camp Sunday. Through the service, you have seen some of what our children have been up to and some of what they have been learning. The theme for the week was "Who Is My Neighbor?"

It comes straight out of Luke's Gospel. Do you remember who asked Jesus that question? It was the lawyer who was trying to test Jesus, and Jesus answered the lawyer's question with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

It's easy to be critical of that lawyer, but it seems to me that it's a vitally important question to ask these days. Who are our neighbors? Are they only the people who live next door to us? Are they only the people who think and believe like us? Are they only the people who look like us?

Our children have been exploring moments in scripture all week that point to who our neighbors might be and how we might act toward them. One of the stories they learned this week was the story you heard Paul read just moments ago — the story of Jesus healing a paralytic.

It's an interesting story, because it is a healing story, but it's also what scholars call a controversy story — because of the fight it causes with the religious leaders.

The story begins simply enough: One day, Jesus was teaching in a house.

By this point in his ministry he'd gained enough of a following to attract not only the common folk of the villages where he visited, but also "Pharisees and teachers of the law" from all over the region of Galilee (Luke 5:17). We're left to assume that they'd come because they'd heard the stories about him — about the miracles he'd done. And, being lawyer-types, they'd inevitably also come to challenge him if he swayed too far from the orthodox teachings of the Jewish faith.

So he sat teaching — the house packed with everyday folk hoping to hear a good word and under the scrutinizing ears of his critics.

That's when it happened. At first, it was just flecks of dust that fell from the ceiling. Then, whole tiles came crashing to the floor; long splinters of wood and big, slate shingles... until, finally, a gaping hole with sunlight pouring through.

They looked up and saw several people up there with picks and sledgehammers. Once the dust cleared, they threw their tools aside and they began lowering a gurney down to the floor. On the gurney was a man who'd been paralyzed. Slowly, slowly, they lowered him down into the middle of the room.

Imagine if that happened to us on a Sunday morning. I'm fairly certain that I'd stop the sermon mid-sentence and start hurrying people out the door, but not Jesus. Jesus was a master at managing interruption. He had a gift for improvisation. The Reverend Reggie Weaver, recounts a story about Wynton Marsalis, the great Jazz trumpeter.

He says, "He was playing a gig one night; and in the middle of one of the songs, someone's cell phone started to ring, which could have been disastrous. But Wynton didn't stop, didn't miss a beat. He started playing the ring tone on his trumpet and finally resolved back into the original melody. He made it part of the song" ("When the Roof Crumbles," a sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC, September 9, 2012).

Jesus was probably preaching on his favorite topic — about repenting, for the kingdom is near — when the roof fell in and a man was lowered into his presence, and what did Jesus do? He turned the interruption into part of his sermon. He said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

Well, that set the Pharisees and the lawyers off: “What do you mean his sins are forgiven?! Only God can do that!” (It seems to me that people looking to find something wrong with someone else always succeed.)

Jesus replied, “You need to examine your hearts. Which is easier: to forgive someone of their sins or to say ‘get up and walk?’ But so you know that I have the authority to do either” — he turned to the man who’d been lowered to the floor by his friends and said — “Stand up. Carry your gurney out of here, and go home.”

And to everyone’s amazement, that is exactly what happened.

You see what I mean? It’s a healing story, but it’s also a “fight” story. Jesus heals a man, and Jesus gets into a fight with the Pharisees and scribes because of it.

You know, in our current context of partisanship, divisiveness, and conflict, it would be easy to preach on the back half of the story while completely ignoring the front half. It would be easy to preach on the “fight” part and forget the “healing” part.

But, here’s the thing: the front half of the story is the *important* half, because it’s the part that we are supposed to imitate — not the fighting and bickering and backbiting, but the part where friends tear the roof off of a building to set their friend in the presence of Jesus; to set him before the healer; to see him restored — both body and soul.

That is what I find most compelling about this story: not Jesus’ words to the paralyzed man and not how powerfully he pointed out the hypocrisies of the religious leaders. What I find most compelling about this story is that the faith that healed the man was not his own, but that of his *friends*.

Luke chapter 5, verse 20 reads, “When [Jesus] saw *their* faith, he said, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you.”

In Greek, the word for the noun form of “faith” is *pistis*, and in Luke’s gospel, this is the very first time that the word, *pistis*, appears. This is its first occurrence in the entire gospel, and it is not the faith of the paralyzed man that brings him healing, but the faith and *faithfulness* of his friends.

You see, friends, our faith has never been just about *your* faith or *my* faith. The great faith belongs to the church, and we’re always, always, always holding it for someone.

What was it Ben Sira wrote all those centuries ago? “Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter...” And sometimes, it would seem, faithful friends are also willing to tear a hole in the roof of a sturdy shelter in order to get you the help you need!

The New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, says that, in this moment when Jesus takes note of the faith of the paralytic’s friends, the word *pistis* “bears the obvious sense of hope, trust, and perseverance” (*Luke, Sacra Pagina Commentary Series*, 93).

Hope, trust, and perseverance: maybe this out to be the measure of our friends. Do they instill in us hope, trust, and perseverance?

What did Blake give me when he checked in on me on the evening of March 19, 2020? He gave me hope, trust, and perseverance.

What’s more, maybe this ought to be the measure of whether *we* are truly acting as a friend to others.

The late-great Baptist Pastor, Browning Ware, witnessed such a friendship once. Browning was the Senior Pastor at FBC, Austin, TX for many, many years and he wrote a short weekly column for the local paper. In one article he told this story:

“Miguel and Roberto walked down the hill to the Creek House and asked for work.

‘How much?’ I asked.

‘Twenty dollars.’

‘No.’ [Browning] replied. ‘I won’t hire you for that.’

Pleading with their eyes, Roberto asked, ‘Too *mucho*?’

Haltingly, I explained in my *poquito* Spanish that it was not too much. Twenty dollars was too little! Yes, they could work, but I would pay more.

We now have a fenced garden, grape arbor, stone patio and today or *mañana* they will finish the third rock wall. They laugh with embarrassment when I call them *artistas*.

But indeed they are, and more. Miguel Tinajero and Roberto Rivera are about as much manhood as I have met in a long time. Their families, two wives and most of their sixteen children, live in a small town outside Guanajuato. Their earnings, almost all, go their every week. Miguel and Roberto fill their spartan lives with pinto beans, flour tortillas, potatoes, onions, jalapeños, and fruit. From time to time, I spoil them with frozen Snickers and a beer.”

But, Browning says that he witnessed something of the nature of their enduring friendship through it all one day when he came home and found them at work. He

writes: "My friends had found my one pair of work gloves. Miguel had on the right glove and Roberto the left" (*Diary of a Modern Pilgrim*, 14).

"Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter" (Sirach 6:14).

May we be imitators of the faithful friends, whose faith can even be trusted to carry us into the very presence of God.

Amen.