

## Past Sermons

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany  
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Like many of you, I've enjoyed the drama and inspiration of the Olympics this past week. Not the drama of people bouncing rather than skiing down a mountain, although I've seen that. Not the drama of watching someone slide unconsciously down a luge track underneath their sled, although I've seen that. The drama I enjoy is watching someone accomplish something no one's ever done before. Especially when no one ever expected them to do it. I like it when the commentators are taken by surprise: whoa, they say, we've never seen anything like that before. Then there are the inspirational stories of people who have overcome huge obstacles in order to fulfill their dreams of being an Olympian.

No one would bother watching the Olympics if unexpected things didn't happen. It's downright inspirational when all expectations are exceeded, and all obstacles are removed.

Today's gospel lesson offers us exceeded expectations, and obstacles being moved, and ends with an inspired crowd saying to themselves: Whoa ñ we've never seen anything like that before!

The past few weeks of Epiphany we've seen Jesus' circle of followers expand, and his circle of influence widen. Word has gotten out that when you are touched by Jesus you are healed. More and more people are paying attention. The crowd is so large in today's story, that all access to Jesus is blocked. People cannot get close enough to his healing touch.

A lot of details are left out of this healing story. I've always assumed that those carrying the man to Jesus were his friends who loved him and wanted him to be healed. I assumed that they had so much faith in Jesus' healing powers, that when they saw the obstacle of the crowd, they dug with their hands through the clay of the roof, not caring about the consequences of destroying someone else's property. And they worked tirelessly to figure out a way for their beloved friend to come to Jesus. We don't know that any of that is true, though that does make for an inspiring story. Who couldn't use friends like these?

Perhaps this man is one of the invisible people from the outskirts of town, whom no one would look at or acknowledge. Perhaps he was lifted up against his will by people who wanted to use him to stump Jesus. "We'll see if you can heal this, Jesus of Nazareth". Perhaps he was dumped against his will at the foot of Jesus. He would have been powerless to stop them from using him. And once through the roof, he had no exit strategy unless Jesus really could make him walk again.

The lack of details doesn't make the story less inspiring. It just shifts the source of inspiration.

All we really know is that this man, who relied on others to get him close to Jesus, found himself waiting with the others to see if Jesus would meet their expectations. Jesus sees the faith of those who carried him, manifest as determination, and says to the man, Son, Your sins are forgiven.

Whoa. Where did that come from? No one expected him to do that. Because only God can forgive sin. Everyone knows that. No one expected Jesus to call him "son" either. They can't believe they just heard him say that.

Another epiphany moment. Another moment in which we are called to pay attention to what we hear and what we see. What just happened here?

Let's back up a moment to the lesson from the Old Testament, from Isaiah. Do not remember the former things, says the LORD. I am about to do a new thing, says the LORD. One of those new things has just happened in this healing story. Jesus does not say "I forgive you", although the religious authorities accuse him of that. Jesus announces that his sins are forgiven. And his sins are forgiven while he is yet paralyzed. And his sins are forgiven before he even asks. He does not confess them. He does not repent of them. Before he changes anything he does or anything he is, Jesus says his sins are forgiven.

The next thing he knows, he's listening to Jesus and the scribes argue about who is doing what and how difficult it is, and he is told to get up and go home. And he does.

Do not remember the former things, says the LORD. I am about to do a new thing, says the LORD. Jesus has just demonstrated that sin is no longer an obstacle between God and God's creation. Jesus words reflect that reality. And when the man gets up taking his bed with him, his actions reflect that reality as well.

We've never seen anything like this before.

The man, once paralyzed, once unable to participate in the community because of his deformity, has been given a new way of going about his life. Jesus tells him to get on with it. Don't go back to living like you're paralyzed. Carry the bed which once carried you. Pick it up off the ground and don't leave it around for anyone to trip over. You've got a new life now and it doesn't involve sin. So do what you were meant to do. Be what you were meant to be: a witness to God's power which makes people whole.

His healing is a metaphor for what God has done and continues to do. As the man picks up his bed, he walks through crowd which is reportedly amazed, or as the Greek indicates, "standing outside themselves".

So the epiphanies continue. Another person has been made whole. And yet another perceived barrier to God's grace has fallen. God is turning things upside down once again. The task before us is not to seek forgiveness but to live forgiven lives. To walk away from our old lives and into our new realities as forgiven people.

Our forgiveness is so unconditional that it precedes repentance, it is not due to the efforts of our repentance. Could forgiveness actually move us to repentance, and learning a new way of living?

This new thing that God is doing is amazing.

Living a forgiven life us means we have to learn a new way of doing things.. Isaiah says God has already made that way for us, paved it with forgiveness, healing, and love. Jesus, the light toward which we are drawn during Epiphany is the one who lights our way.

The way which God has already prepared.  
The way which Jesus has already walked.  
The way which Jesus continues to walk before us.

Sometimes it's more difficult to believe what has already happened, than in what might happen. That is what this story challenges us to do. Believe what God has already done in our lives.

Your sins are forgiven, Jesus says. It is a truth we must learn again and again. It is a truth we must learn together. Together we take in God's word: the word, which St. Paul says in Corinthians, is always yes in Jesus. Together we remember God's goodness to us and to those who have gone before. Together we confess our sins and together hear the announcement of forgiveness poured over us. That announcement assures us that God doesn't hold on to those sins, even those which we might choose to hang on to for a while. In fact, in Isaiah God says that we burden God with our sins that he is weary of! God says, "I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins." (Is. 43: 25)

Whoa ñ we've never seen anything like that before.

As the days of the Epiphany season wane, God's power and authority in Jesus have become clearer and clearer: We've heard about God's power over evil, God's inclusion of those we would call unworthy, and God's power over the effects of sin in our lives. As the days of epiphany wane, we learn more about who Jesus is.

As the days of the season wane, we see that Epiphany is not just about who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing. Epiphany also offers an insight into our identities as God's beloved and God's forgiven. We are called to get on with these forgiven lives. And that is what we are learning to do together.

May God grant that we are always surrounded by those who wish to see us whole, and help us overcome obstacles to God's presence. And may we always be amazed by the new thing our loving and forgiving God has done in our lives. Amen.