

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
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Tenacious Friendship – Won't You Be My Neighbor
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The Bible is full of crazy stories. If you have yours with you this weekend, go ahead and turn over to Mark chapter two, I'll be there for most of today. I think the problem with some of these stories in the scripture is that we can read them so quickly or they become so overly familiar to us that we miss the intensity or the weight or the drama, the tragedy, the comedy, even the bizarre and the stories. And so, in this particular story today, many of you have heard me talk about it before, but I want to address it today from the angle of neighboring. What we find is that Jesus has come to town preaching and he's at the height of his popularity. He is shaking up the religious establishment. He's doing miracles. He's creating a stir across the Galilee. And in Mark chapter two, verse one, we read this.

2:1 When Jesus returned to Capernaum several days later, the news spread quickly that he was back home. ² Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there was no more room, not even outside the door. While he was preaching God's word to them, ³ four men arrived carrying a paralyzed man on a mat. ⁴ They couldn't bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, so they dug a hole through the roof above his head. Then they lowered the man on his mat, right down in front of Jesus. ⁵ Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven.

So Jesus is back in town preaching. There are four guys that want to go hear him preach, but they've got this friend who's paralyzed. So, they go to his house, pick him up literally and take him to the house where Jesus is preaching. I just want you to imagine with me for a moment, these guys picking up this fully-grown man on his mat and walking, stumbling through the rocky roads of Capernum to get to the house.

So then when they get to the house, which some scholars believe, by the way might have been the house of Peter's mother in law. That's kind of a fun fact. We know this because one chapter earlier, Jesus was at her house and was healing a lot of people in the town. So, they get to the house and people have come from all across the Galilee to hear Jesus preach. In fact, they may have come as far as from Judea and Jerusalem and so it's completely packed standing room only. They can't get in.

Now, if I had been one of these four guys I would've just said, well, the dude's got to stop preaching at some point and so we'll just hang out right here by the backstage door in order to get our friend an encounter with Jesus. But that wasn't good enough for these guys. I don't know how the conversation went down, but that one of them said, we've got to get in the door doesn't work so let's try a different route. So what route do you choose? Well the roof? Obviously. So, these four guys carry, again, I want you to imagine this with me. They are carrying their paralyzed friend up to the roof. So, then you get to the roof. What now? Well you dig a hole, of course. Now I want you to understand that in this time, in first century Galilee, the houses were constructed in such a way that the roof would have a combination of beams and tree branches and tree limbs that are in kind of a crisscross mesh pattern. And then over that there would have been a very hard, thick clay. They are digging through this roof and they're not making a hole

that's just kind of annoying on a rainy day, they are creating a hole that is big enough to lower a fully-grown man through. They are excavating this person's roof.

Now I want to take just a moment to put the camera down in the house for a moment because Jesus is down in the house and he's preaching and as he preaches, things began to drop on his head. There's branches and clay dropping on his head and I'm wanting to know what is Jesus thinking? What is everybody else thinking? And if it is indeed Peter's mother-in-law, where is she and what is she thinking? This is a whole new level of won't you be my neighbor?

And so, then they figure out a way to lower him through the hole, I don't know how they did this, I don't know if they like took off their robes, created some sort of pulley system, but they lower him at the foot of Jesus. Now I want you to just imagine this scene with me for just a moment. All eyes are locked on Jesus with maybe a few side glances to the owner of the house. Jesus is looking at the man sitting at his feet. The man is sitting there looking at Jesus' eyes. Jesus glances up at the four friends still on the roof, peering down through the hole wondering what's going to happen next. And scripture says, seeing their faith. He said to the paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven.

Not exactly what they had come for, but that's good. And the Pharisees start to grumble because they believed that of course God is the only one with the authority to forgive sin. So, who does this Jesus guy think he is granting forgiveness of sins, but Jesus knows what they're thinking in their hearts. And Jesus says okay, well, watch this. I mean, not really, but that's what I like to believe that he's thinking in his head. And he tells the man, pick up your mat and go home. And that man stood up, picked up his mat and walked out the door. And the scripture says that the people says, well, we've seen remarkable things here today. That man walked out of that house that day with new faith and with new legs because of the faith of some tenacious friends who were so determined to get their friend to Jesus that they were willing to destroy someone's house to make it happen. So, the title of my message today is, Who's Willing to go to Jail for You? Not exactly, but I do want to push us to move a little bit deeper than the surface and to be willing to go past the point of convenience in our friendships with one another because that's where neighboring begins.

Let me just pull a few things out of the story. First, I want us to notice that friends carry the mat, friends carry the mat. This man lived his life on a mat. It was his safety, it was his security, it was his home, it was his identity. It was also a symbol of his weakness. It was a symbol of everything that was wrong with him. It was a symbol of those things that made it hard to be in relationship with him. It's the thing that he could have used to keep people at an arm's distance. Don't get too close to this. It's the thing that he could have been ashamed for people to see, adamant that they not touch, fearful if someone were to get too close. And on the other side of the equation, the mat could have been the thing that the four friends said, you know what that's a hindrance to relationship. You don't want to get too close there because that's going to be harder, everything's going to take a little bit longer, it's going to be a little bit more difficult. There is a burden to bear if you step into that relationship and not only a burden to bear, but at this time in history, there was a stigma attached to his condition. It wasn't just a physical burden, it was a spiritual problem to be in relationship with this man. And yet that point of pain was not the hindrance to relationship. The man on the mat didn't say, no, no, don't come close to this. The four friends didn't say, you know what, that's a little bit too hard. That point of pain, instead of

being a barrier to relationship became the point of connection that created the possibility for a miracle.

We all have a mat. We all have one. It's that thing that we're nervous for people to find out about, that we don't want anybody to see. Maybe it's something in our past, it's an insecurity, it's a fear, it's the thing that we try to hide or we try to avoid or we try to put a mask over. It's the thing that we're afraid if we let that out, no one will want to be in relationship with us because it's too difficult. It's that confession that we need to make. It's the help that we need to ask for it. It's the weakness that we just need to own. It's the insecurity that we need to admit. It's the tragedy, the trauma, the trial that we're trying to walk through and survive. It's the hurt, habit, and hang-up that we're trying to wrestle to the ground. It's the sin that we've committed or the sin has been committed against us. It's that thing in our past or the thing in our personality, something about our family or our finances, our circumstances that we try at all costs to just hide because we're afraid if somebody sees that they're not going to want to get close. We can use that mat to keep people at an arm's length or we could say, this is the point where I want to invite someone in because this point of pain and this place of connection with this mat could become an incubator for healing and transformation.

Who's carrying your mat today? Because your miracle might be just on the other side of your vulnerability and on the other hand, whose mat are you carrying? Because somebody else's miracle may be just on the other side of your being willing to embrace the awkward and the messy and the inconvenient. Whose mat are you carrying? Whose carrying your mat?

My husband, Ryan is from the west coast, and so when we go out there to visit, I'm always wanting to go down into northern California to see the Redwoods and the Sequoias. And what I'm already struck by when I'm there is that these Sequoias grow to these amazing heights. Now these massive trees that are 300 feet tall, and the crazy thing about them is that their root systems are actually pretty shallow. In fact, most of the roots systems only go about 12 feet down. They can survive and thrive in as shallow as three feet of soil. The strength of these trees, the anchor point for these trees is not in how deep the roots go, but in how deeply interconnected they are with one another. No Sequoia grows on its own. The root systems intertwine and they connect with one another and they share water, they share nutrients, they share minerals, and they create a base of support for one another. The strength of their roots is not in their depth, but in how deeply connected they are with each other and I would say that God has created us as people the same way. I would say that many times following Jesus and spiritual maturity has less to do with how deep we are and more to do with how deeply connected we are to one another.

Ryan and I had been involved in a number of small groups during our time at NCC, small groups for couples, for singles, for young professionals, for Capitol Hill staffers, for men, for women in leadership for those that are seeking recovery. About four years ago, we started a new group, it was largely people in our neighborhood, people that were single, mostly 20 somethings, millennials. And we decided to have him come over to our house on Sunday nights and we'd have a meal. And then after the meal we'd play games or we'd watch movies or just have conversation. Hold that thought. On April 26, 2015 we brought home a baby. She was only three days old, but she had been seven years in the making, or at least seven years in the praying, I guess she was the traditional nine months in the making. But we were surrounded by so many people, so much community that we're praying for her and fasting for her, believing for her,

having faith and carrying that mat when we had lost faith. On April 26th at 1:00 PM, we bring home this three-day old baby and a few hours later on that Sunday, our group showed up. This time they weren't seeking dinner, they actually brought dinner. They brought onesies, they brought diapers. They stayed a few moments and they still show up every Sunday night. And what I love about that community is that my daughter has never known a single day of her life at home without extended family and community being a part of her life. And so, every Sunday night they come and they put her on pillows and give her magic carpet ride throughout our house and they're willing to show up when I'm out of town officiating a wedding and Ryan has to go on an emergency pastoral counseling, pastoral care visit, and they'll show up to hang out with Sawyer. And they'll give her sleepovers on Saturday night so that Ryan and I can have a date night. Ryan and I created this group because we wanted to be a part of carrying mats for younger people and yet the way they have carried our mat has been so much more profound and significant. Who's carrying your mat?

Another thing that I want us to see in the story is that when we carry the mat, we changed the story. We activate new stories. We activate new life. The man on that mat walked away from that scene completely changed with a completely new life, a new outlook, with a new way of living because of the faith of his friends. It wasn't even his faith. It was the faith of his friends and their faith activated a new story. The author communicator, Andy Stanley says, 'your friends will determine the quality and direction of your life.' Show me who your friends are, whose voices are loudest in your ears, whose opinions matter the most? I can make some pretty good predictions about where you're heading. His life was changed because of their faith. Whose faith is changing your life and whose life is being changed because of your faith.

Now, I think a lot of times when we think faith, we think of it as a mental exercise, right? Like we think to build our faith, we have to kind of work ourselves up, will ourselves to a place of like strong spiritual certainty and it manifests itself with like wishful thinking or giving well wishes. But the reality is faith in this story is very active, it's very physical and raw and tangible and it's hard work. The faith of those four friends manifested itself in carrying a man through the streets of Capernaum up onto the roof of a house and lowering down to the feet of Jesus. These were guys that believe that spiritual maturity sometimes manifested itself in sweat and they believed that a little sweat was the stuff that watered the seeds of miracles. Sometimes I think spiritual maturity might be measured in the calories that we expend on behalf of another person. Faith is physical, it's raw, it's tangible, it is hard work, but someone else's miracle is on the other side of your faith, someone else's miracle is on the other side of the risks that you take, the place where you push past inconvenience. It's on the other side of your checkbook, on your calendar, someone's miracles on the other side of your very active faith. These friends were willing to lend their faith to another and when they did it change his story. But he didn't just change his story it changed the story of the community around him. We read in verse 12, it says that this amazed everyone and they praised God saying, "*We've never seen anything like this!*".

You see that what's cool about these four guys is that they activated a new story and the life of their friend, but they also activate a new story in the life of that community. Everyone around witnessing this says something new has happened today, something remarkable has happened today. It caused people to praise God. And so, the miracle of the faith of these four friends is not just that they carried the mat, not just that they lend their faith to somebody and he is transformed. The miracle of the faith of these four friends is that they set the stage for Jesus to

show up and show off. Their friendship allowed Jesus to step into this place where he revealed something of his character and his power and his compassion, even his sense of humor. Their faith unleashed a proclamation of the Gospel and the results of their faith became the talk of the town. See, maybe you're in a situation today where you. You've been hesitant to plug into a small because you thought, you know what I'm just not there. My faith isn't strong enough, I don't have anything to offer. But maybe that's the very reason you need to get into one because you need to borrow somebody else's faith for a season. Or maybe you're not in one because you think you're good, you've got it all together, you don't need it. But maybe there's someone that needs to borrow your faith for a season. Maybe you've been hesitant to go on mission because you think you know I don't have the energy, the capacity, the strength to carry a mat right now, but maybe you deciding to go on mission mat in tow, vulnerability, weakness included, could be a gift to the team and a gift to the people that you're even going to serve.

Jodi Otto is a very good friend of mine, serves on a team with me here at NCC. But back in 2012 she took a team of friends from Florida on a mission trip to Haiti. One night there was a young man named Israel who read a devotional and then shared this with the team. "I don't know why I need to tell you this, but I feel like as Christians we need to stop praying that hard times don't come our way, but instead realize he will use these hard times to place us where we need to be." Don't run away from the mat, embrace the mat, carry the mat. Quit praying that he'll take away the hard things and allow him to show up and use the hard things to put us where we need to be. That devotional thought would be the last words that some of that team heard from him. The next day a current swept Israel out into the ocean. Eight hours later after a grueling, difficult, fearful search, his body was recovered and Jodi as the leader of the trip had to call Israel's parents. In September of that year, Jodi moved to DC to be part of our protege programs, six years later, she's still here. And as she told me a few weeks ago the most vivid memories of Haiti she has are those last five grueling and haunting days of loss, those five days of losing a friend, losing a teammate, searching for a body, identifying a body, calling the parents. She had a mat. And this year she decided to go on mission with our A1:8 team back to Haiti. She felt as though God were calling her there and she picked up her mat of loss and disappointment of all of the what ifs and if onlys and she went to Haiti in search of a change story. And that team rallied around her and they picked up that mat and carried her on that journey, and in that time, she found life and redemption and resurrection. That team carried Jodi's mat on the way to Haiti so that her Haiti story did not end with death. When they carried the mat, they allowed a new story to emerge. Not only that, but when Jodi got back from this most recent trip, Israel's dad called her and said, I want to know the organization that you worked with on this trip because I want to partner with them and support them and the work that they're doing. The faith of that team didn't just activate a new story in Jodi's life. It activated a new story in Israel's family's life as well of life and redemption and resurrection. Who's carrying your mat, who's lending their faith to you? Whose mat are you carrying? Where are you allowing others to borrow faith from you? Because when we carry the mat and when we lend faith, we change the story.

Jesus used a lot of metaphors to describe what the church is. The church is a family, the church is a field, the church is a temple. The family tells us that we have a place at the table where we're loved and we're known and we belong. The temple declares that the church carries the presence of God with us wherever we go. The field says that there's fruit that there's harvest. But one of my favorite metaphors that is used in scripture to describe what the church is like, is the body. Romans 12:4 - 5 says

"⁴ Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵ so it is with Christ's body."

We are all parts of his one body and each of us has a different work to do and since we're all one body in Christ, we belong to each other and each of us needs all the others. We are living, breathing, walking around, representations of the hands and feet of Jesus. When we walk together in community and we come together in friendship, we're actually showing the world of picture of who Jesus is and what he's like.

Several years ago, I was in graduate school at Louisiana State University and I was teaching on this idea of the body of Christ and I was all excited. I was telling some of us were the head, some of us were the mouth, some of us, the eyes, the ears, the hands, the feet. And after I gave this what I felt was a really stirring talk on the body of Christ and how we all need to play our role, this freshman comes up to me and she says, Heather, I really enjoyed your talk tonight? But I just, I don't, I don't know that I'm actually a part of the body. And it wasn't that she wasn't following Jesus, she was following Jesus. She just didn't feel like she had a role to play. She said I mean, I don't know, like if I am a part of the body I'm something really small and insignificant, like, like maybe I'm a nose hair or something. Now, I was studying biological engineering and so when she said that I began to geek out, I was like, you're a nose hair? Do you know how important you are? You are like part of the body's natural filtration system. You are on the front lines of defending the body against pathogens and bacteria and all kinds of nasty stuff. Thank you for the work that you do and I go on and on for about five minutes and he's just looking at me like I'm crazy. And I'm just really glad she didn't tell me that she thought she was an appendix or something because I'm not sure what I would've done with that one. [inaudible] we're all part of the body of Christ and you have a role to play and the world only sees a true picture of Jesus when we all show up and play our role.

You may not think you need the body of Christ, but the body of Christ needs you. And it needs you to play your role because when you play your role, you activate new stories in the people's lives around you. And when we come together and play our role as a community, we show the world a picture of who Jesus is and what he's like. So, if you're a nose hair on the body of Christ, you be the best nose air you can possibly be.

John 13:34, Jesus told his disciples

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

What if our love for one another was so profound that it proved once and for all to the world around us, that Jesus was who he said he was and does what he says that he does?

This weekend I want to challenge you. Are you willing to move past convenience to commitment, move past convenience to commitment? What if we were willing to measure our level of friendship by the access we were willing to give to our mats? If we were willing to measure friendship by how close we're willing to get, how much sweat we're willing to expend to carry someone else's ma. Is our faith transforming the lives of those around us?

In the final chapter of the book of Romans, we find a list of names. Romans 16, Rufus, Erastus, Justice, Priscilla, Aquilla, Olympus, and on and on it goes, there's about three dozen names. Now, the book of Romans is one of the most difficult books of the Bible, in my opinion, to understand, interpret, apply. It's by far the most theological book that we have. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he said, this is my statement of faith. This is what I believe and why I believe it. I'm going to give you a systematic understanding of what it is I believe about God and the work he's doing in the world around us. It's this very dense, heady, academic theological book, and then he gets to the end and he just let's all of these names be listed. It's as though Paul gets to the end of his greatest work and he makes his great statement of faith. He tells his story of his faith and he lets the credits roll because those were the names of people that had gone on mission with him, the names of the people that had cared for him and fed him and bankrolled his ministry and showed up in prison with him and gone to prison with him. People who had disciplined them, people he had disciplined, people who had carried his mat. He gets to the end of his statement of faith and his story of faith and he says, I can't tell my story of faith without mentioning these names. It's his Romans 16 list. And we all have one of those. We all have these names of people that when we tell our story of faith, when we talk about what it is that we believe, when we talk about the things that Jesus has done in our lives, there are certain people whose names we can't leave out of the story. Small Group leaders, teachers, Sunday school teachers, coaches, praying grandma's. We say, I can't tell my story of faith without mentioning these names. We all have our own Romans 16 list.

But I want to flip the question today. Whose Romans 16 list will your name show up on? Who are the people that can't tell their story of faith without mentioning your name because you carried their mat, because you let them borrow a little bit of faith because you went the extra mile because you were willing to push past convenience. Friendship absolutely invites the awkward, but the awkward initiates miracles. Friendship is very hard work, but that hard work leads to transformation and friendship reflects and refines our faith and that faith has the ability to change the stories of those around us and change the story of the world that we live in. Go friend well and neighbor well.

God, I thank you today that you created us to do life in community and that when we love one another well, we show the world a picture of who you are and what you're like and what you're up to in the world around us. God, I pray that you would help us to carry the mats of other people, but God may be the hardest thing for us to do today is to reveal that mat to somebody else. God, give us the courage to let other people step in and support us in our weakness, in our vulnerability. God, show us where we need to go the extra mile on behalf of someone else, where our sweat can water the seeds of a miracle. God, help us know the role that we play in your body so that we can show the world around us a complete picture of who you are. In Jesus' name, Amen.