

Twice healed: 2 Corinthians 1:18-22; Mark 2:1-12

by [Douglas R. Loving](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

When the congregation I serve initiated a prayer chain several years ago, its participants were amazed at the response: healing intercessions requested for all manner of illnesses and ailments—physical, emotional, spiritual, societal. The calls poured in from members and nonmembers alike.

Why so well received? In part, because those seeking out intercessory prayer know that they will be surrounded by a cadre of faithful folks who already know firsthand the healing presence and power of the Holy One. They join together in seeking wholeness, and those in need draw confidence through this shared connection.

The Gospel lesson introduces us to a “mobile unit” prayer chain. These friends of the paralyzed man come equipped with sturdy legs and strong arms as well as prayerful posture. Their confidence in Jesus’s healing power mobilizes them (accompanied by others, we’re told) to pick up their disabled companion and transport him to the feet of the Master. Determined and focused, they’re not afraid to dismantle a portion of the roof to gain access to this teacher and healer for their immobilized friend.

Jesus’s response to this bold interruption must have surprised many in the crowd. He speaks to the paralyzed man not as a result of any direct request from the patient himself, but in response to the faithfulness of his confident companions. Even more startling, Jesus doesn’t heal him, not just yet. Indeed, he doesn’t even mention the affliction that is so obvious to everyone else.

Instead, Jesus focuses on the disease at the core of the man’s being: a broken, incomplete relationship with God. He offers healing through words of forgiveness, so this man may find free access to the love of God that will carry him through all of life—a wholeness that a dysfunctional body cannot deny him.

The physical healing, the “take up your mat and go home” drama, occurs only at the very end of this encounter. It seems almost tacked on, an afterthought utilized as a teaching device. Yes, the crowds are awed by Jesus’s miraculous power as the man gathers up his portable bed and heads home. Yes, the religious leaders are confounded. They have already been outraged because this rabbi presumes to

speak words of forgiveness as if he were God. Now, once again, they see that he can truly effect physical healing. No wonder the hierarchy is threatened, even in these early days of Jesus' ministry. It's a fitting conclusion to Mark's vignette.

But we first meet the radical, life-transforming power of the Christ in the middle of the story, not at the close. That's where most of us are, mucking about in the messy middle, still grappling with thorny issues and unsolved problems. Rancorous relationships remain stuck in destructive patterns. Building bridges across the centuries of mistrust and hostility in Ireland or the Middle East continues to be a precarious and fragile venture with uncertain outcome. Bodies fail us; physical wholeness eludes us. Often we cannot yet fold up the mat and gladly walk, skip, dance or run home.

Recently I've discovered afresh the reality of inhabiting the unresolved middle of Mark's story as opposed to its healing conclusion, as I might wish. The doctor explained that a liver transplant offers the only treatment for my rare disease (a disease that also affected my fellow Chicagoan Walter Payton). Due to a shortage of organ donors, he continued, only about one-third of those needing livers will receive them. The others die.

In the aftermath of that nearly paralyzing news, I was awed to find spiritual companions gathering around me, bringing great blessing. Their faithfulness lifted me, carried me, toward the Healer when I couldn't find my way alone. A wise counselor helped me quiet my spirit, so I could listen to and cherish my errant liver, instead of feeling betrayed by its failure. A faithful spiritual friend guided me toward the rich promises of scripture and the written wisdom of the saints. Many folk joined in continuing prayers for healing. Together, each in his own fashion, they have buoyed me up and continue to transport me into the transforming presence and healing power of Christ.

Their faithfulness has helped me experience a reality that I suspect the paralyzed man discovered as well. Even without being free of physical disease, we are offered God's transformative gift of love that can mean more than healthy bodies. As Paul insists in his letter to the Corinthian church, every one of God's promises is a yes. Sometimes, the no that we hear from elsewhere opens the door to hear a divine yes with fresh clarity and profound gratitude.

In the opening portion of his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius helps reframe priorities: “In everyday life . . . we must hold ourselves in balance before all created gifts . . . We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening [God’s] life in me.”

Jesus’s words of forgiveness to the paralyzed man turn out to be God’s most transforming yes, thanks to his friends. And we are invited to be the friends who carry others to the feet of the Master so they, too, can hear the good news.