

Why Are You Here? *Mark 2:1-12*

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Why are you here? Is it friends or family? The music or mystery? Are you here because you've always been here, or here because it's somewhere to go?

Why are you here? Is it tradition, contrition, what you should do or what you have to do, because this is the one place where it all makes sense?

Why are you here? Is it healing you seek? Forgiveness you need? Guilt, shame, all the above? Are you here because the rest of life is up in the air and here is where the ground is?

Why are you here? Is it love? Love of one another? Love of God? Love of coffee and cookies and fellowship and service and music and mystery and tradition and contrition?

Why are you here? Is it Jesus? What Jesus can do? What Jesus can do for you? Or does it even matter, so long as you are with him and he with you?

Why are you here? Because here you are...loved...accepted...healed...forgiven.

Were you to poll the crowds pressing in the house that day, you probably would've gotten a host of answers to the question: Why are you here? As we have seen thus far in Mark, Jesus has quickly gained widespread fame. We ended chapter one being told that Jesus could no longer enter a city openly, because crowds of people were always waiting for him.

Finally, Jesus manages to sneak into town, and is hiding out at a house, when the people find him. The crowd fills the house so that no one else can enter. They bring their needs and Jesus heals them, and speaks to them a message.

And that's when it happens. As Jesus is talking, dirt starts falling down onto their heads, into their eyes. They clear their eyes of the dust, when they are blinded by light. There's a hole in the roof! And when their eyes finally adjusted to the sunlight, they see a man. A man on a mat, being lowered down by four other men.

Why are you here? We are bringing our friend to see Jesus, that's why. The house was so crowded, we couldn't get in. *No one would let us in.* And so we made our own way.

And there, in the middle of the house, at the feet of Jesus, is their friend. But Jesus doesn't ask the man on the mat why *he* is here. He just looks at him on that mat, looks at his friends, and says to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Is that why he's here?

We don't talk much about sin these days. This past week I was meeting with Pastor Nate Liedtke, the minister at New Life Lutheran Church in Norwalk. He's a friend, and he wanted to meet to ask me about our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). No, he's not considering joining our church, he's leading a Sunday School study entitled "Your Neighbor's Faith", and each week they explore a different faith tradition. Today is Disciples Sunday.

He has a workbook, but he wanted to go right to the source and find out what Disciples believe. It sounds a lot easier than it is, because try and talk to a Disciples pastor about what Disciples believe. He got a lot of: "Well, some Disciples believe this, but not all of them." "And some churches do that, but we all don't." We Disciples do agree; we agree that it's okay for us to disagree.

But one thing I could say pretty definitively when he asked what we believed about "Original Sin." "Oh, we don't believe in that at all!" I said. Let me remind you what "Original Sin" even is: it's the belief that people are born in sin, with a sinful nature from the moment of birth. Humanity is, inherently, sinful. Most church traditions that teach original sin practice infant baptism, a beginning of life declaration that this child, though born in sin, will be raised in faith in God.

But in Disciples churches, you won't hear much about Original sin. We really don't talk about *sin* at all. "So you believe people are, basically, good?," Pastor Nate asked me. "Well, yeah," I said, trying to ignore the tabloids, evening news and all that comes across my Facebook feed. "I believe people are naturally good."

"So, why do you need Jesus?" he asked me. It's a good question. Why do we need Jesus?

Growing up, I believed Jesus' purpose was to point out people's personal, secret sins. When we talked about "sin" we thought about people's dirty deeds and thoughts, their bad habits. We obsessed with what people did in their bedrooms. We had a list of words called cuss words that good Christians were not allowed to say.

But in Jesus' day, he didn't point out people's sins so much as hang out with people labeled sinners. And sin, in those days, wasn't so much the individual things someone did wrong, but who you were. Sin was a state of being. You were born in sin, because of where you lived, your class, your nationality and even your health. If you were born blind or deaf, you were a sinner. If you had polio or leprosy, you were a sinner. If you were poor, you were a sinner. It wasn't about what you did, it was who you were.

And being a sinner meant that you were shunned, kept on the edge of town and society, and not allowed to enter the temple to worship. This man who came through the hole in the roof was labeled by his society, unwhole, unclean and worthless. And don't even think about touching him, for his dirty sinfulness might wear off on you.

But if that was not enough, in those days, someone who was poor was often sick, and because of their sickness, they were often in debt. Not a lot has changed, since then.

In fact, the word for “sin” and “debt” was the same word. That’s why our different Christian faith traditions get all tongue tied when we get to that part in the Lord’s Prayer where we ask for forgiveness: *are* we asking for forgiveness from trespasses, debts or sins?...well, yeah. All the above.

Jesus could’ve just said, “Stand up, take your mat and go home,” and the paralyzed man would’ve walked home, healed, but he would’ve still lived under the weight of poverty and debt and rejection.

But when Jesus sees the man, he says, “Son, your sins are forgiven,” which is also saying, “Son, your debts are forgiven.” And both statements, really, are just different ways of saying, “Son, these things that the world say keep you from society and from your God--these things are no more. They are forgiven. They are taken away. And you are restored--to health, to life, to community.”

We don’t talk much about sin anymore, but maybe we should?

Of course, the religious leaders are indignant at Jesus’ actions. They call it “Blasphemy”, which is a crime that could carry the penalty of death. From this point on in the Gospel, they will look for ways to trap Jesus. “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” they protest.

In other words, it’s God’s job to forgive, not ours, so we are going to leave things as they are. It’s sad this man is separated from society because of illness, and that he has so much debt because he can’t afford health care, a place to live or food to eat. But he’s a sinner, and there’s nothing we can do about that. Who can forgive sins but God alone?

Maybe they’re also mad because they were some of the ones who were owed payment by this poor man. Jesus’ actions expose their hypocrisy. They are the scribes, the teachers of God’s law, and yet they have no Good News to offer this suffering man, so sick and depressed he can’t make it to Jesus without being carried on the mat and the faith of his friends.

So Jesus speaks the good news to this man. It was the good news he longed to hear, even if he couldn’t muster up the strength to ask for it. And he left the house that day on his own two feet, healed and whole.

And it makes me wonder, why do you need Jesus? Why are you here?

Maybe we don’t talk much about sin anymore because even though we believe we are inherently good people, we find it hard to admit that there is so much about us that is

broken. That we are given to selfishness and we judge others and we act in our own interest, even when we know it may harm someone else. We know we are complicit in a system that feeds off the oppression of others. We know that we are no better than anyone else, and yet we want to think that we are.

We don't talk about sin anymore because we don't want to admit the truth about who we really are. That we are sinful and selfish.

Or maybe it's the opposite. We may say we are good, but deep down we are paralyzed by our guilt, guilt that has been heaped upon us by family and religious systems, driving a wall between us and God. What we really believe is that we aren't good enough, and we will never be. At times we wonder why we should even bother. We can never get it right. We can never be right.

Maybe we are just cynical about it all. Sin is a given. It's the way it is, and probably the way it always will be. Through Christ, we believe we are covered by grace, forgiven, and one day things will be made right, but for now can we really expect ourselves or this broken world to ever be different?

And that's when it happens, for whatever ever reason, through no fault of our own, we end up at Jesus' feet. And he looks at us and says to us the thing we never knew we needed to hear, but is the one thing that our souls crave to hear: "Son...daughter...your sins are forgiven."

And with those words, we are healed. From our guilt and shame. From our indifference and selfishness. From our cynicism and doubts. We are healed!

We don't owe God anything, and yet we want to give God our everything. We are forgiven. We are made whole. Nothing can separate us from God's love.

And we don't deserve it. We haven't earned it. It may not be why we are even here. But Jesus has given it anyway.

Why are you here? Because here you are...loved...accepted...healed...forgiven.

Believe this good news: Son, daughter...you are forgiven and you are loved.