

“Yes, we improv...And we improve!”

Fourth sermon in the Eastertide “Yes, And...” series: Preparing + Improv-ing

Yes, you can stick to a plan...and you can improv(e) along the way.

Luke 5:17-27 (NRSV)

“I Love to tell the Story...” (*we sang this hymn earlier in the service...*)

We love to tell the story, don’t we? Especially when it has a happy ending. In this story in Luke’s gospel, improv leads to immediate and visible improvement. Must have been nice for that guy...to have his life fixed so quickly. To be healed. To be forgiven. To be free. Why can’t the story end like that for us?

Well, keep in mind that these verses in Luke’s gospel are kind of like a post on Facebook. Someone’s life can look and seem amazing in that moment...but we have no idea the back story behind that one moment. How they got there...and what happens next. The same is true in today’s text.

Also – how we think about the word “improvement” matters. Improvement doesn’t always look like a completely healed disease or a better grade in math or a job promotion that

pays more or a leaner more muscular physique.

For example, with home improvement we want things to go as planned. This type of project means laying out plans and blue prints and following them to a T or else you end up with a leaky roof or faulty electrical. Improv-ing is not a great thing to do when it comes to home improvement. Life improvement – spiritual/emotional improvement – is a bit different. With this kind of improvement, it means being willing to push the plans we have for ourselves aside and realize that what we might need to improve may not even be in our plan. So we improv. And usually when it comes to life improvement stuff...our friends and those closest to us often see what we need long before we do.

This seems to have been the case with the friends of the man in today’s gospel story.

Luke tells us that the man is paralyzed. Luke names him in the story as “a paralyzed man.” And up until this day, this man’s journey is boiled down to his paralysis...until Jesus expands our vision and shows us who he really is.

Jesus sees him differently. In verse 20, Jesus says, “Friend, your sins are forgiven you,” except that the word that the New Revised Standard version translated as “friend” is actually the Greek word *anthropos*, which simply means “human.”

You see, in today’s story I think Jesus heals this man in three ways. And the first way is just by naming him as human, *anthropos*, when he had probably been seen by society for a long time as, at worst, sub-human, and at best, “not-like-us”-human or paralyzed human or dis-abled. To be called human is to be reminded that this man is of the same substance of his friends and of all these in this crowd. It is to be reminded that instead of seeing the one thing that makes him different from everyone else, Jesus sees what makes him the same as everyone else – his humanity. There are many ways we de-humanize others...with words or glances or labels or policies...and Jesus

always seeks to re-humanize. To restore dignity. To remind us of our nature (we are human and created in God’s image) and our names (we are beloved).

The second way Jesus heals this man is that he pronounces that his sins are forgiven. And this is done NOT because Jesus knows that this guy has done some seedy things. Jesus pronounces the gift of God’s grace to this man – the gift of forgiveness of sins quote “when he saw their faith,” (Luke 5:20). *Their* faith. The faith of his friends. The Greek word here for faith is *pistis*. *Pistis* is a word that implies trust and reliability and loyalty. It is not a faith like we think of faith in terms of “believing” the right or wrong things...it’s a faith that is rooted in these actions of trust and loyalty and reliability, actions that are so clearly demonstrated by this man’s friends. It’s almost like saying, “When Jesus saw the lengths this guys friends went to to get him here and how they would not let him down and how they trusted enough to know that there was a way when there appeared to be no way and because they didn’t give up but kept persevering”...when Jesus saw that *pistis*, he said to the *anthropos*, the human before

him, “your sins are forgiven you.”

You see, our healing and wholeness is tied up with the healing and wholeness of others. It’s not *his* faith...it’s *their* faith. Maybe this man was too beaten down to have faith on his own. Really, I don’t think we are meant to have faith on our own anyway. It’s always *their* faith...until one day I can add my faith to the mix and it becomes *our* faith. Think of the biblical witness of the faith of our foremothers and forefathers...we just named in our prayer the women who nurtured us and passed on the faith to us. *Their* faith has become *our* faith. And in that discovery, healing and wholeness comes. We are not alone. We are united in our humanity, in our absolute need of God, in our love for God and in our love and forgiveness from God.

Theologian Paul Tillich believes that in that moment Jesus wasn’t forgiving the specific sins of the paralyzed one, he was simply proclaiming the truth that in the sight of God the man was sinless.¹ God sees us as God

created us – beloved and whole, not as fragments or failures.

“In Jesus day, (and more subtly in ours), religion proclaimed that human suffering was the consequence of human failure. Sufferers had done something very wrong to slight God or at least upset the balance of the rules of prosperity. To be sick or invalid was to have broken the rules. Yet in all the gospel accounts when you look at the original Greek, Jesus doesn’t say “*I forgive your sins*,” he always says “*your sins are forgiven you*.”² He is stating the fact that already exists for all of us.

“The idea that we as humans have somehow deeply offended our loving parent is the really messed up notion that has held the Church, and Christians, captive and paralyzed for millenia”. As one pastor wrote, “Isn’t it time we blew the roof off that lie³ and walked out of the prisons of our fear of not being worthy of God’s love or never doing enough or being enough? Because that fear keeps us ensnared in shame, gripped by guilt.

¹ Peter Woods, “Digging down to healthy understanding,” *The Listening Hermit* (Feb. 14, 2012), accessed on May 12, 2019 at

<https://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/02/14/digging-down-to-healthy-understanding/>.

² Woods, *ibid*.

³ Woods, *ibid*.

So when Jesus simply states the truth that this man's sins are forgiven, he's trying to get us to understand that God loves us and God is not holding our sin over our head using it as punishment. Any guilt or shame we feel is not because God is causing that...it's because we feel that. Jesus was trying to restore the truth of our healed and beloved humanity for all of us – not just for those who were physically, visibly ill or injured.

It seems that, time and time again, Jesus' primary healing was always first our psychological, emotional, spiritual healing...which is the hardest kind of healing. And the hardest kind of improvement. It is often not seen by the outside...it is only known by us on the inside.

You'll notice that it's only after the Pharisees begin to question Jesus' ability to pronounce that this man's sins are forgiven that he physically heals the man. The Pharisees thought this was blasphemous because they knew the forgiveness of sins comes from God alone...further proving Jesus' point. And when Jesus asks, "*Which is easier to say 'your sins are forgiven you' or 'stand up and walk'?*" (Luke 5:23) he's really asking a trick

question. Neither are easy. Both are of God. And Jesus can do both. And he proves that this man's sins are forgiven (which is something you cannot see) by healing this man so he can get up and walk (which is something you can see). It's both and...an integrated healing...of body and soul.

This begs the question, would Jesus have physically healed this man if the Pharisees had not questioned his ability to pronounce the forgiveness of sins? Well, we don't know if Jesus would have told the man to get up and walk. We don't know if the man actually even comes seeking physical healing. Maybe he just wanted to hear Jesus teach that day. There is so much we don't know.

What we do know and what we can see in this story is a lot of healing, that is initiated by one important move of improv. When the crowds keep them from going through the door, the men improv to get their friend before Jesus. And then Jesus improves when in the middle of his teaching a man drops through the roof and lands in front of him. He sees these guys and their love for their friend and their faith and trust that getting him before

Jesus was important and he speaks to the man telling him his sins are forgiven. This was not part of Jesus' lesson plan that day. Neither was it part of the Pharisees plan to see someone claiming to be able to forgive sins. When Jesus is questioned, he improves again – and thinks, “Okay, I need to show them this tangibly,” and he tells the man to get up and walk. The man finds strength to stand and the ability to move somehow. It was not part of that man's plan to be able to walk home that day. Improv. Improv. Improv. Which is another way of saying act and react, react and act. This is life, right?

In this case, this bold move of improv by the man's friends led to distinct and definitive improvement in him. Not just because the man was physically able to walk. In addition to that obvious improvement, is the spiritual and social improvement that he is no longer living in public shame or humiliation. If people thought he had been paralyzed because of his sin...they now knew that was not the case. And amazement came over the crowd and their ability to see God at work right before their eyes in Jesus improved 100% in that moment.

In this story, improv leads to such clear improvement. Often, we don't see such easy or quick results do we? Or to put it differently...we don't see the results we want to see because of our actions...no matter how hard we try or how hard we pray or how many doctors we see. And when the healing doesn't come and the answers to prayer don't come, we question God and God's plan and why this is all happening to us. We move away from a posture of improv and we slink back into that posture of life having a plan that has gone all wrong in so many ways. And we are disappointed and distraught...and rightly so, especially when suffering is involved.

Maryann McKibbin Dana, the author of the book we're reading as a congregation this Eastertide, “God, Improv, and the Art of Living” speaks eloquently and mysteriously of this idea of improv in the midst of truly heartbreaking situations. When she was a pastor, one of the families in her church had two young boys who were ill with the same genetic disorder. Both boys died. Writing about this experience, Dana says:

“In trying to come to terms with what happened – forget “making sense of it” – I tried to find a home along the theological continuum. I wasn’t ready to give up on God altogether, but neither did I resonate with a God who pulled the strings, made the plans, and had to fill a quota of little blond eight-year-old angels in heaven. “There is more undeserved suffering in the world than faith can contain,” someone wrote to me recently, and I felt the power of those words as I chafed against the easy answers.

The middle ground felt comfortable enough – God grieves with us; God can bring good out of bad circumstances – and yet it seemed incomplete. I longed for more.

As I sought to find words to understand God’s action in the midst of this family’s pain, I kept coming back to the incredible medical personnel whom I saw caring for these two boys. Medical crises don’t follow a schedule or a plan. Every day requires flexibility, new approaches, and improvisation. Yes, And.

Each morning in Minnesota, doctors, nurses, techs, and social workers huddled around

the medical charts during rounds, scanning the previous day’s events and setting a course for the day to come. They were improvising: *What did we try yesterday that worked or didn’t work? What might healing look like for the patient today?* They were working together to answer a basic question: *Given what we have to work with, what is the best Yes-And possible?*

The work of serving Jacob changed day by day. At first the Yes was to halt the ALD [his disease] and save his life.

As circumstances changed, the Yes changed:

- To keep his body strong while it fought the graft-versus-host disease.
- To help him keep some food down.
- To manage the pain.
- To get him successfully through an infusion of mesenchymal stem cells, a last resort.
- To keep him alive until his father could make the final journey from Virginia to say good-bye.

[The YES changed moment by moment as some things worked and others didn’t. The YES was

the true reality of Jacob's condition in any given moment. As that fluctuated and changed,] what didn't change was the medical personnel's commitment to see the situation as it was, to be adaptable, and to bring their best efforts to caring for him.

This revelation sent me to Scripture. And as I considered God's action in the sacred story – especially the God we encounter in Jesus, who took on human limitation for our sake – I didn't see a God with a plan. I saw a God who improvises, like those dedicated hospital workers. I saw a God who is creative and dynamic, working with us to bring about the best wholeness – the best Yes – at any given moment.”⁴

In moments of devastating grief, sometimes there is no easy AND for whatever the YES is. Or it can take cares to get to the AND. Maybe there never is an AND beyond the hope of the resurrection. Sometimes we just have to live through each YES, through each reality...whatever it brings and try to feel our way to the presence of God...no matter how painful. And sometimes...that presence

comes through other people...whether it's a medical team that shows us how to be present for someone or a group of friends who won't give up on getting their friend in front of Jesus.

Mothers, and caregivers, know a thing or two about improv. Raising children is a crash course in improv each and everyday. Being a caregiver is a crash course in improv every day. And with each decision made, the prayer of the mother is that their child would be growing into a healthy person – in body, mind, and soul – strengthening and improving in their academics and social skills and life skills and relationship skills and deepening their faith. No parent does not want to see their child improve. With a caregiver, the improvement might look different...it might just be to provide peace and comfort and presence...a sense of worth and wholeness that goes beyond the state of one's mind or body.

This is how God sees us as well. God wants to see us improve...and is giving us the life experiences and tools to do so. It will often feel like improv, because it is. It'll feel

⁴ Maryann McKibbin Dana, *God, Improv, and the Art of Living*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, MI) 2018, 167-169.

like you have no idea what you are doing. It can be uncomfortable and embarrassing at times. Just ask our Calvary-ites who came to the Monkey Butler Improv workshop last week! ☺ There is no prescribed plan. But through it all, God is there, sometimes right before us, other times more hidden. That's where our friends come in. That's when they do everything they can do to help us deal with whatever we're dealing with...and remind us that God is right beside us, right before us.

This man's healing and wholeness came because he had friends who knew that the closer we are to Jesus, the more likely we are to feel that wholeness. I'm sure his friends had no idea what would happen when they dropped their friend in front of Jesus. But they knew he needed to be near Jesus. And they got him there. And they did whatever it took to get him there.

We can't improv through life on our own. We need one another. We are created for one another. When we are weak, another is strong. When we are struggling to survive, another is succeeding and thriving. We improve in life – as people and

as people of faith – when we help each other improv through all the tough stuff in life. When we help each other see the light at the end of the tunnel when all we can see is darkness. When we climb to a rooftop to lower our friend before Jesus when everyone else is crowding us out from him.

Sometimes we are the ones on the mat. We need to be helped. We need to be seen by Jesus. And if that is you today...then my prayer is that you allow yourself to be seen, to be helped onto the mat...allow yourself to be lowered. And if you can't get through the doorway, say, "hey friends...what about the roof!" Your friends may need you to help them know how to help you. Be courageous. Ask for that help. And take it. Let yourself be surrounded by friends and lowered into Christ's presence. And stay as long as you need. Even when we are healed, there is no timeline on when we have to pick up our mat and start walking again.

Others of us may be doing well in life. We're not on the mat. In that case, ask yourself: who is society not seeing right now that needs to be on that mat? Who do you need to lower

through the roof...not so much so that Jesus can see them but so the crowd can see them...and know they exist and are beloved in God's sight. Whose humanity and dignity can you help restore? Who do you need to take a risk for?

I've been thinking about it a lot...and despite all the crowds and all the obstacles that seem impossible to overcome, I know who I would lower before Jesus and in front of the crowds. All of the victims of gun violence from school shootings...the children and teenagers who have been shot and injured and who are still dealing with the shrapnel in their psychological and spiritual selves. We aren't seeing them. We aren't hearing their mothers and their fathers. Or at least – we aren't seeing them as Jesus sees them. If we truly saw them, we would do something – anything – about it. We would change our laws. We wouldn't care about whether or not it would work or not...we wouldn't care about whether or not some body's right was being infringed on...because we all we would see would be the lives being lost...and we wouldn't be able to see anything else. No one knows the answer to how to stop these shootings. There

isn't one answer. There are many. And we have to start trying some of them. Any of them. Improv. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work...then trying something else. But not trying anything is to just keep lowering these dying children through the roof and letting them pile up. Or even worse – to not even lower them through the roof...just leave them outside...outside of our consciousness, outside of our vision.

If you have every lost someone to gun violence you know – the shrapnel never leaves your soul. Sometimes we don't know if what we improv will actually improve anything. I'm sure the friends didn't know that day when they lowered their friend through the roof. But they took a risk. They did something. They believed it would make a difference. And it did.

Who would you lower before Jesus if you could help heal someone or some ill or injustice in our society?

Because we must believe that improvement is possible. In any area...even those that seem beyond our control.

We start to lose our faith when we stop believing that things

can improve. If we've started to believe that something can't improve because "it is what it is" then we know we need to practice the spiritual practice of improv...we need to be pushed out of our comfort zones and into the zone of God's imagination.

Because remember – this is the key part of this passage: Jesus said, "When he saw THEIR faith..."

We are in this together. We need one another. Our faith is not an isolated experience. It seems our salvation, our wholeness, is tied up with others. We need one another – to help each other and to heal ourselves. And when we feel whole, we can help bring that wholeness to the world.

There are so many ceilings that need to be cracked open...let's go let some light in and lower down those who need to be in the presence of love. Those who need transformation. Whether it's you – or someone you know – or someone you don't know. Be brave. Be courageous. Improv.

The witness of Scripture is that if we want to improve – our lives or the world – then it's time we start leaning into

improv...it may or may not work...either way...Jesus will be there, and so will our friends.

I truly believe that when we start improv-ing we will start improving...as individuals and as a society. But whether that's true or not...what do we have to lose?

Amen.

**Sermon at *The Gathering*
6:30 p.m. – Same Text & Title**

This is a story I'm sure many of us wish we could claim as our own. To have friends who care about us enough to carry us when we need help. To have a verbalized reminder of forgiveness that absolves us (or at least soothes us) of any guilt or shame we are feeling. To have Jesus see our pain and heal us. To be able to walk home one night when that same morning we couldn't even dream of walking. Our paralysis may not be the same as this man's...but we've all been there. On the mat.

And it's easy to be envious of this guy. Because it seems like one quick improv moment led to lasting improvement in his life. One minute he was being lowered by his friends...and the next minute he was being raised up by Jesus. Why can't the story go like that for us?

Well, I'll remind you that much like those rosy social media facebook posts that portray that all in life is peachy keen – there's probably more to the story than what we see in a few glamorous vacation pictures on Instagram or in a gushy over-the-top my-life-is-great post on

Facebook or even in a few verses here in Luke.

The truth is – there is so much to this story that we don't know.

We don't know how long this guy had been paralyzed...if this was a condition he lived with from birth or if he had an accident at some point that left him unable to walk. We don't know how many doctors or healers he had seen before...if any. We don't know if he wanted to be healed or if he just wanted to be able to hear Jesus teach...to hear him "live" in person. We don't know if he was feeling guilt or shame because of his condition, but we can imagine it would have been hard not to. Society, then and now, does not do a good job of seeing someone beyond what the physical appearance presents. We don't know how often he got out – if he was often carried around by folks a lot or if he was homebound because of his paralysis. We don't know how far he had traveled to be there...if he was a stranger to the gathered crowd or a familiar face.

We do know that he had some friends or family members or kind neighbors who were willing to carry him on that

day. We do know that they were determined not just to get this man within earshot of Jesus, but to get him right in front of Jesus' face, and when the method by which they had anticipated doing this was unavailable, they did not walk away or give up. When the doorway was jammed with the dense crowd we don't know if they tried saying, "*Excuse me? Pardon me!*" or if they tried to shove their way through or if they tried a window or two. We don't know all the different ways these guys tried to get their friend before Jesus...or how long each of those attempts took. We just know the way that worked...the method that ultimately succeeded. We don't know whose idea it was to lower him through the roof or how long that process took or how many people tried to stop them. We just know that it worked. I suppose it would have been hard for it NOT to work...unless when the ceiling caved in everyone went running. But it didn't. Somehow – they got their friend down through the roof, in front of Jesus, and people stuck around to see what Jesus was gonna do about it.

When I was little and heard this story in Sunday School I

always wondered about whose house this was...and if they ever thought, "Okay Jesus – you healed this guy – can you magically fix our roof please?" I worried about rain leaking in the house or bugs getting in there or them getting sunburned because they probably didn't have sunscreen. No one else ever seemed concerned with those matters. I was told that the roof probably got fixed quickly...and that there were different kinds of roofs back then and so it wasn't as big of a deal to repair it. My experience is that whether it's a collapsed camping tent or hail damage on your shingles at home or fire damage to your awning at church – fixing a roof always feels like a big deal. I like to think those friends, and their newly healed friend, came back the next day to fix the roof. But. We'll never know, will we?

There is so much we do not know...and never will. This is true for all biblical stories, and it's true for the stories of our lives as well. It's especially true of the stories we hear from others...because so often we only hear the end result – that the guy was lowered through the roof, the chemo worked, the family was reunited, the deal was cut, the bill was passed, the

suspect was apprehended, the fire was put out, the plane was delayed, the factory was shut down, the player was disqualified. Stories are so easily boiled down to their conclusion...and their conclusion is often remembered as the final action that took place in a long sequence of events. And unless it's our story, or unless we ask the right questions, we'll never know what that whole long sequence of events entailed. We won't know all the twists and turns, all the doors opened and all the doors slammed shut, all the 2nd and 3rd chances, all the potholes and roadblocks, all the hard work paid off and the random strokes of good luck. We'll just know the ending. Or the part worth telling. Or the part people are willing to listen to anyway.

So much of our stories live beneath the surface. And so much of the stuff that lives beneath the surface is the stuff of improv. We try one thing and it doesn't work so we try another and another until we find one that does work. We date one person and that doesn't work out so we date another and another. Maybe we find someone, maybe we don't. But we are forever defined by where we ended up with

that...we're single...or we're married...or we're divorced...or we're widowed. We interview for this job and then that job, we get a job and stay in it a while then get laid off and then we get another job. Whatever job we have now – or that we had when we retired – is how we are known by the world. Or if we don't have a job – we have a title for that too – unemployed. Or think of this reality: we were born here, and we grew up there, we went to college back east and did an internship on the west coast – where we met our partner and now we live in the Midwest. When we're asked where we are from – we either pick the place we're born or grew up or the place we are living now...but it's almost always just one place.

You see, this story just really got me thinking about how much really happens in our lives and how many things we try and fail and try again and how we are so often defined by that which is the latest thing or the most current thing that has happened to us or the most easily identifiable thing about us. In the case of today's story – the man is paralyzed. Luke names him “a paralyzed man.” And as soon as he is healed, he is just a “he” again in Luke's

story. No descriptor. Until the next thing happens to him in his life...and then he'll probably be defined by that.

We are really good at defining and labeling and categorizing. Ourselves and others.

When Jesus just wants to call us human. And forgiven. And healed. Those are the only categories or labels that matter.

You see, Jesus sees this man differently than the others do...they see paralysis. He sees humanity. In verse 20, Jesus says, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you," except that the word that the New Revised Standard version translated as "friend" is actually the Greek word *anthropos*, which simply means "human."

I think that in this story Jesus heals this man in three ways. And the first way is just by naming him as human, *anthropos*, when he had probably been seen by society for a long time as, at worst, sub-human, and at best, "not-like-us"-human or dis-abled. To be called human is to be reminded that this man is of the same substance of his friends and of all these in this crowd. It is to be reminded that instead of seeing the one thing that makes

him different from everyone else, Jesus sees what makes him the same as everyone else – his humanity. There are many ways we de-humanize others...with words or glances or labels or policies...and Jesus always seeks to re-humanize. To restore dignity. To remind us of our nature (we are human and created in God's image) and our names (we are beloved).

The second way Jesus heals this man is that he pronounces that his sins are forgiven. And this is done NOT because Jesus knows that this guy has done some seedy things. Jesus pronounces the gift of God's grace to this man – the gift of forgiveness of sins quote "when he saw their faith," (Luke 5:20). *Their* faith. The faith of his friends. The Greek word here for faith is *pistis*. *Pistis* is a word that implies trust and reliability and loyalty. It is not faith like we think of faith in terms of "believing" the right or wrong things...it's faith that is rooted in these actions of trust and loyalty and reliability, actions that are so clearly demonstrated by this man's friends. It's almost like saying, "When Jesus saw the lengths this guy's friends went to to get him here and how they would not let him down and how they

trusted enough to know that there was a way when there appeared to be no way and because they didn't give up but kept persevering"...when Jesus saw that *pistis*, he said to the *anthropos*, the human before him, "your sins are forgiven you."

What do those things have to do with each other? His sins and their faith?

Well – it's complex and a bit of our mystery but it seems like Jesus is teaching us that our healing and wholeness is tied up with the healing and wholeness of others. It's not *his* faith...it's *their* faith. Maybe this man was too beaten down to have faith on his own. Really, I don't think we are meant to have faith on our own anyway. On this Mother's Day we acknowledge that for many of us our mother's faith has become *our* faith...or at least it has certainly been passed down to us even if we've pushed against it at times. But it was a foundation. Or maybe for you it wasn't your mother...but your father...or maybe it was a different pastor or mentor or friend. Somebody's faith influenced and formed your own. And in so many ways it's

in their faith that we find healing when we can't seem to find the way for ourselves. The truth of Jesus' words is that we are not alone. We are united in our humanity, in our absolute need of God, in our love *for* God and in our love and forgiveness *from* God.

And also just as it's not *his* faith, it's *their* faith, it's also not just *his* healing...it's *their* healing too...their forgiveness of sins. Because it's a whole societal system and way of thinking that needs to be healed and revamped.

"In Jesus day, (and more subtly in ours), religion proclaimed that human suffering was the consequence of human failure [or sin]. Sufferers had done something very wrong to slight God or at least upset the balance of the rules of prosperity [and good fortune]. To be sick or invalid was to have broken the rules. Yet in all the gospel accounts when you look at the original Greek, Jesus doesn't say "*I forgive your sins*," he always says "*your sins are forgiven you*."⁵ He is stating the fact that already exists for all of us. He is reminding us of how God already sees us. It has nothing

⁵ Peter Woods, "Digging down to healthy understanding," *The Listening Hermit* (Feb. 14, 2012), accessed on May 12, 2019 at

<https://thelisteninghermit.com/2012/02/14/digging-down-to-healthy-understanding/>.

to do with what we have or haven't done and it has everything to do with what God's done.

When Jesus simply states the truth that this man's sins are forgiven, he's trying to get us to understand that God loves us and God is not holding our sin over our head using it as punishment. Any guilt or shame we feel is not because God is causing that...it's because we feel that. Jesus was trying to restore the truth of our healed and beloved humanity for all of us – not just for those who were physically or visibly ill or injured. After all, this guy hadn't even gotten up off his mat yet!

It seems that, time and time again, Jesus' primary healing was always first our psychological, emotional, spiritual healing...which is the hardest kind of healing. And the hardest kind of improvement. It is often not seen by the outside...it is only known by us on the inside. And it is a healing and a wholeness that takes a lifetime to discover. We can walk around feeling fragmented and disjointed and lost our whole lives if we're not careful. But wholeness – emotional and spiritual and psychological wholeness – it is

available to us...always...no matter what is going on with us physically. But we need one another to help us figure this out sometimes. Or let's be honest, all the time.

In the last episode of Season 3 of the ABC TV drama, *This Is Us*, Kevin Pearson explains this to his niece Tess. This is not a spoiler alert if you've watched Season 3...if you're a bit behind...this still won't ruin things for you.

While over at the house watching Tess and her sister, Kevin notices Tess is distraught in her room. He sits down to talk with her. Tess is middle-school aged.

After asking her Uncle Kevin if he remembered when she came out to him via text message, Tess revealed her new concerns. "I thought coming out to you guys would be the hardest part, but instead, I just have a million more questions about myself," she said. "Like what clothes make me feel like the real me? What books should I be reading? What movies should I be seeing? When will I finally decide to tell my friends?"

Kevin pauses and then says, "I've never been through what

you're going through right now . . . so I'm not gonna sit here and pretend like I know how you're feeling, OK? Because I don't," he said. "But this whole idea of not really knowing who are you are deep down inside? That's my life story.. *(you might remember that Kevin is the one that deals with addiction issues)*. . . One thing that I have learned? I don't think we figure out exactly who we are all at once. I think it happens over a long period of time, like piece by piece."

He continued: "Take me for instance: A couple years ago, I get close with your dad and I find a piece of myself. And then I meet your aunt (who is the woman he's dating) and I find another piece of myself. Honey, I think that's sorta how it works, you know? I think we go through this life slowly but surely, just collecting these little pieces of ourselves that we can't really live without until eventually we have enough of them and we feel whole."⁶

Notice he says "feel" whole...not "become" whole. We are already whole. I just think we spend our whole lives trying to finally understand and feel that that's the truth. That

we are whole. And as Kevin says, all these pieces of our lives, all these relationships and experiences...they help us feel that. We need friends to be full and whole selves.

I think that's what the man on the mat in today's text felt a bit more of when he walked out of that house. He was a bit more whole. Emotionally and spiritually and physically. Maybe he had found one more of his pieces.

And that wholeness came because he had friends who knew that the closer we are to Jesus, the more likely we are to feel that wholeness and to find those pieces. I'm sure his friends had no idea what would happen when they dropped their friend in front of Jesus. But they knew he needed to be near him. And they did whatever it took to get him there. Even drop him through the roof...a masterful moment of improv ingenuity if you ask me.

We can't improv on our own...just ask those of us who were here Tuesday night with the Monkey Butler Improv group! We need partners. And we can't improv through life on

⁶ Murphy Moroney, "Kevin and Tess's Conversation on the This Is Us Finale Is Monumentally Important, Here's Why," *Popsugar* (3 April 2019), accessed on

May 12, 2019 at <https://www.popsugar.com/family/Kevin-Talking-Tess-About-Coming-Out-Us-45988034>.

our own either. We need one another. We are created for one another. When we are weak, another is strong. When we are struggling to survive, another is succeeding and thriving. We improve in life when we help each other improv through all the tough stuff. When we help each other see the light at the end of the tunnel when all we can see is darkness. When we climb to a rooftop to lower our friend before Jesus when everyone else is crowding us out from him.

There will always be crowds pushing us away from Jesus...keeping us...and our friends...and those in need...away from the center of the community. The question is: what will we do to make our way through those crowds?

In the end, this story is not really about the physical healing. That happens. But it happens almost as an improv afterthought when the Pharisees push Jesus on the fact that he is claiming this man's sins have been forgiven.

The Pharisees thought this claim was blasphemous because they knew the forgiveness of sins comes from God alone, which actually further proves Jesus' point of

our sins being forgiven way before his time.

In any case, when Jesus asks, *"Which is easier to say 'your sins are forgiven you' or 'stand up and walk'?"* (Luke 5:23) he's really asking a trick question. Neither are easy. Both are of God. And Jesus can do both. And he proves that this man's sins are forgiven (which is something you cannot see) by healing this man so he can get up and walk (which is something you can see). It's both/and...an integrated healing...of body and soul.

Now this begs the question, would Jesus have physically healed this man if the Pharisees had not questioned his ability to pronounce the forgiveness of sins? Well, we don't know.

What we do know and what we can see in this story is a lot of healing, that is initiated by one important move of improv. When the crowds keep them from going through the door, the men improv to get their friend before Jesus. The spiritual improvement (or healing) and then physical improvement (or healing) follows the bold move of improv.

If you are stuck in life right now...on a mat or maybe just in your head or in your faith or in a relationship or in your job...or in your body...ask yourself: could it be that you're not improving like you wish because you are trying really hard to stick to your plan...when maybe God is inviting you to a whole different plan altogether? I'm not saying that's the case. Each of you is going through something different. And I don't know. What I would encourage all of us to ponder is – maybe it's time to think outside the box. Maybe it's time to stop looking for open doors and windows and other “signs” from God...and instead climb up on some rooftops and just bust your way in to where ever God is.

Who knows what will happen when you're in the presence of Jesus.

Maybe the simple invitation of this passage today is to consider that when we are improv-ing, we can't help but be improving. Because the more we let go of control of our lives...the more we are able to hang on to God. And God's always gonna take us on the ride of a lifetime. Maybe even take us up and drop us through

some ceilings that need to be shattered. Let some Light in. Let some healing begin. And when you fall through those ceilings...and it will feel like falling sometimes...don't forget to look up...maybe, just maybe, you'll see the faces of your friends above...and the face of Jesus right beside you. And you might even start to see yourself a bit more clearly too.

Because I really do believe it is true that when we are open to doing things differently or in a new way or even seeing something in a new way...when we are open to improv-ing, God is hard at work improving our lives...in ways we never thought possible.

Yes, Improv-ing. And, Improving. They are the same word after all. Go figure.

Amen.