



The Paralytic, John Thompson

Since I moved to Atlanta, I've picked up a number of southern idioms. One of my favorite southern expressions is the warning, "Preacher, you've left off preachin' and taken to meddlin'." The good news of *Mark 2:1-12* is that it calls us to a ministry of meddlin'.

Meddlin' for Access

Jesus is teaching in a house, and is drawing such a crowd that there is no room. Four folks decide to bring a paralyzed man to Jesus, carrying the man between them. When they get to the house, they can't get inside. Since their loyalty—sometimes translated as *faith*—is too strong to leave the guy on the pallet outside, and since there is no special access for people on pallets, they take to meddlin'. They climb the stairs to the top of the house. Then they dig a hole right *through* the roof. Having successfully destroyed someone else's property, they lower the one with paralysis through the hole, in front of Jesus.

Nowhere in this entire story does *anyone* ask for a cure for paralysis. What these five folks want is *access*: access denied to the one on the pallet because he cannot propel himself into the house; access denied to the four pallet bearers unless they leave their friend outside. These five want access to the house, to the teaching, to Jesus. And they want it badly enough to take to meddlin', even if it means they have to dig right through the roof.

Access from Unlikely Sources

Shortly after I moved to Atlanta, I met Guy Pujol, a good Baptist preacher. He saw a need to teach seminarians about HIV/AIDS, giving them information that could change their ministries and save lives. Guy proposed to teach this as a class at his seminary for his Doctor of Ministry project. The proposal was lauded by his advisor, needed by his colleagues, and dismissed as impossible by the faculty of the school.

Meddlin'

BY MARGARET AYMER

Guy wanted access—for himself, for the seminarians, and for the HIV-positive church-going persons they would be serving. But there was no way in. An unlikely community from a neighboring poorer, historically-black seminary, however, gathered around Guy. The Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) put him and his class on a "pallet," "dug out the roof" to allow him access, and lowered this class on HIV/AIDS for seminarians down. The beloved community of ITC left off with preachin' and took to meddlin'. And our meddlin', in the form of this and other classes on HIV, has literally saved the lives of ITC seminarians, seminarians from surrounding schools and parishioners throughout the deep South.

Guy's is not the only story of access denied. At the heart of *many* of our conflicts is the question of access—access to water resources, to food, shelter and adequate medical care, to energy, human rights, education or a place to call home. In our denomination, we too fight about access—about breaking open the ceiling and giving everyone access to their God-given vocations. What would happen if we started knocking in some roofs? What would happen if we made it our practice to leave off preachin' and take to meddlin'?

Would we demonstrate in the streets until all have access to the health care they need, regardless of their income level? Would we overwhelm our local, state and national governments

until people would no longer starve for food, or be forced to choose between housing and medicine in this rich nation of ours? Would we metaphorically climb to the top of the Capitol, and break through the dome, on behalf of those who cannot carry themselves through the door: the undocumented, unseen and unheard? Would we, who have so much power, insist that if everyone can't come in, we're taking it to the roof? Do *we*, as people of faith, have the faith and loyalty of a community of pallet-carrying roof-breakers? Are we ready to leave off preachin' and take to meddlin'?

"Let It Go Child; Your Sins Are Forgiven"

I imagine that a pallet coming down through the roof must have amused

Jesus. But even in his amusement, Jesus would have realized that the person in front of him had a problem. You see, in the first century, people believed that sickness was caused by sin. So, if your body was not like every one else's, if you had such a grievous illness as paralysis, you must have been *very* sinful, indeed.

This belief was something the paralyzed man probably had to live with as long as his paralysis. It was probably as normal to him as his inability to walk. He may even have so internalized that shame and guilt that he saw himself as irredeemably sinful. So Jesus leaves off preachin' and takes to meddlin'. Right there, in front of everyone, he performs a radical healing for this man, saying, "Child, your sins are forgiven" (*Mark 2:5*).

We must understand that the healing of this man takes place in the moment Jesus pronounces the man's forgiveness. In that instant, the man is set free from the cycle of guilt and self-loathing that came with being seen as accursed. He is healed because he has been declared whole. *This*, not what follows, is the radical act of healing that gets Jesus in trouble. Jesus looks at the man and takes the burden of "it's your fault" off his shoulders. "Let it go, child; *your* sins are forgiven."

We, the community of faith in the twenty-first century, claim not to really understand what's going on here. We profess to have separated sin and sickness in our thoughts. Ava Johnson, the protagonist of Pearl Cleage's novel *What Looks Like Crazy on an*

When Jesus declares to the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven, Jesus leaves off preaching and takes to meddlin'. There wasn't just a theological issue at stake. There was a social and economic issue, an issue of authority, power and control.

Ordinary Day, might take issue with our self-righteous assertion. In the first scene of the novel, she is watching a television show on women who are HIV-positive, and she, who is also HIV-positive, says to the reader,

I try to tune [them] out . . . but they're going on and on . . . and all of a sudden *I get it*. They're just going through the purification ritual. This is how it goes. First, you have to confess that you did nasty, disgusting sex stuff with multiple partners who may even have been of your same gender. Or you have to confess that you like to shoot illegal drugs into your veins, and sometimes you use other people's works

when you want to get high and you came unprepared. Then you have to describe the sin you have confessed in as much detail as you can remember . . . Then once your listeners have been totally freaked out by what you've told them, they get to decide how much sympathy, attention, help, money and understanding you're entitled to, based on how disgusted they are.¹

It is possible that Presbyterians have too many social graces to actually engage in those conversations, but there *is* a national interest in the purification ritual. Consider the popularity of shows about weight-loss, recovery from addiction and terminal disease. As a nation, we *do* connect sickness with sin and we want our sick to engage in the purification ritual—we differentiate between the "innocent" sick and those who "have no excuse" for their diagnosis.

Christ's Call to Meddlin'

Yet, as Christians, Jesus calls us to leave off preachin' and take to meddlin'. That means we do *not* get the luxury to decide between those who do and do not deserve health care. We do not decide who should and should not be able to afford medicine. We do not decide between the "innocent" sick and those "who have no excuses."

To follow Jesus, we must give up our desire to see the purification ritual. We must be the community that, in Jesus' name, takes to meddling in the world's affairs. We are called to stand up on behalf of all whom the world considers sick and

sinful, all of the excluded and shunned, all of those from whom the world demands the purification ritual. We are called to say to the one paralyzed with the belief that she is impure, unclean and irrevocably sinful: "Child of God, your sins are forgiven."

Returning to the story in *Mark*, consider the reaction of biblical experts—the scribes—people who made their living in these texts. They remind us that the witness of the Hebrew scriptures is that it is God alone who forgives. The Hebrew scriptures tell us that sacrifices of particular animals in the Jerusalem temple, performed by the priest, were required to signify forgiveness. When Jesus declares to the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven, Jesus leaves off preaching and takes to meddlin'. There wasn't just a theological issue at stake. There was a social and economic issue, an issue of authority, power and control. If preachers could declare forgiveness willy-nilly, without the sacrificial lamb, what would become of the priesthood, the temple, the entire economic structure of Jerusalem?

Jesus steps over the line. He claims that God is not confined to a place, a series of rituals, a group of trained professionals or a set of legal requirements. Jesus claims that the authority to forgive sins on earth is given to him; and as we find out in other gospels, it is given to us. It is *only* because Jesus needs to demonstrate this that he cures the man's paralysis. For the cure is not for the man; the cure is for those who do not believe Jesus has the

authority that the priests in the Jerusalem temple do.

Are we willing to accept this cure? Are we willing to claim that Jesus' authority transcends all rules, all legislation, all church governance, all ordination standards, all social taboos, all of our genuinely-held beliefs? We insist upon a doctrine of the sovereignty of the Triune God. But do we really believe it? Or are we afraid that if *we* follow Jesus to his logical end, *we* will have gone from ministry to meddlin'?

I have news for you. Ministry *is* meddlin'. Every time we stand with those whom our society calls unlovable and say "Child of God, your sins are forgiven," we are meddlin'. Every time we stand against the purification ritual and say, "I don't need to know how or why you're sick; you

need to know that you are beloved of God," we are meddlin'. And every time we get up on the roof and knock in the ceiling so that those who are paralyzed by the injustices of our society have access to the resources that they need, we, the community of faith, are meddlin'.

People of faith, in the name of the Sovereign, Triune God, let's leave off preachin' and take to meddlin'. 🍷

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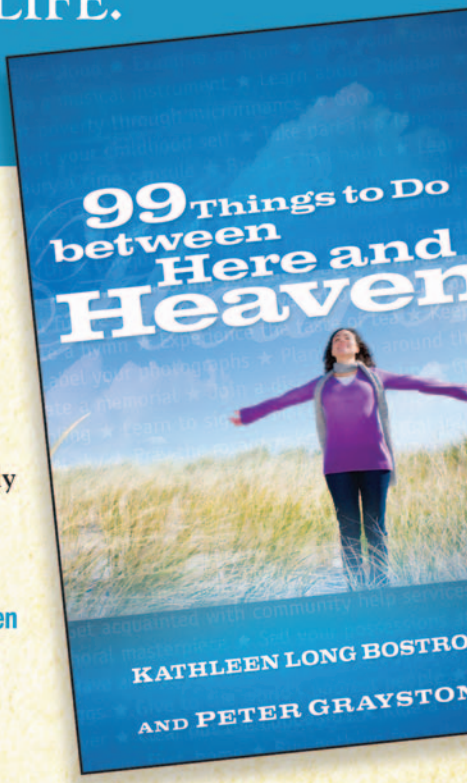
Note

1. Pearl Cleage, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 3-4.

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