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A Bold New Beginning

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Mark 2:1-

You know this time of year we usually plan church programming around the Broncos schedule. The Broncos are just a fact of life for us in the fall. But this year not so much. Those of us who schedule meetings and events never would have dreamed that we would be considering the Rockies schedule instead! It is baseball fever that we have to think about, and it is very exciting. So I begin my sermon today with a baseball story. Joe Garagiola, former major league baseball star and TV personality, tells about a time when Stan Musial came to the plate in a critical game. As a super hitter, Musial was at the peak of his career. The opposing pitcher in the game was young and unbelievably nervous. Garagiola, who was the catcher at the time, called for a fastball and the pitcher shook his head; Joe signaled for a curve and again the pitcher shook him off. He then asked for one of the pitcher's specialties and still the pitcher hesitated. So Joe went out to the mound for a conference. He said "I've called for every pitch in the book; what do you want to throw?" "Nothing" was the pitcher's shaky reply. "Al just want to hold on to the ball for as long as I possibly can."

Do you ever feel that way yourself? When a whole lot is riding upon you, and you know you have to do something challenging, when you know your life is going to change, and you just want to hold onto the ball for as long as you can. As I look back on my life I can recall that at every significant juncture of my life, when the time came to make a change, a part of me was strongly resistant. When I felt called to ministry, and enrolled in seminary, there were so many times I thought, maybe this isn't right for me, I just don't think I can do it. When I had to move away to live in Arkansas for a year, I really did not want to go. Nor did I want to take 2 churches to serve in Eagle and Gypsum. Or when I went back to school a few years ago, I worried that I couldn't cut it, I would feel like a dinosaur. Usually I like to hold onto the ball for just as long as I can. But at some point, you just have to pitch that ball and hope for the best.

As I hear the story of the paralytic, this wonderful story which appears in all of the Synoptic Gospels, I can easily see myself in that situation. I often try to identify with a particular character, to place myself in that context, and in this case I identify most with the paralytic.

We never learn exactly what was wrong with him. But it is revealing that Jesus tells him that his sins are forgiven, suggesting that it is

an illness related to shame or guilt. People do become paralyzed by their emotions, hence the expression *Ascared stiff*.@ It is very probable that this is exactly what is wrong with this man. His four friends try to carry him into the house where Jesus was. There were so many people crowding around that they cannot get in, so they cut a hole in the roof and drop him down. The text tells us that when Jesus saw their faith he said, "Your sins are forgiven." I can imagine how liberating and refreshing it would be to hear those words from Jesus. But later on, when Jesus says, "Get up, pick up your stretcher and go home," I could easily imagine myself saying, "No thanks, I would prefer to just lay here awhile." Because I would have become used to paralysis, comfortable with my situation. It would have been scary and risky to get up and walk. I would not want to make that change at all.

Adam Hamilton is pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, where 9 of us attended the Leadership Institute earlier this month. This church started 17 years ago with 6 people meeting in a Funeral Home, and now has 14,000 members. There have been many challenges over the years, but Adam said that whenever he has embarked upon something new with the church, he remembers the nausea factor. He has to ask himself if this new undertaking initially makes him feel like he is going to throw up. That is his test for knowing that he is a part of something much bigger than he is. That is his reminder to be humble and obedient, and not react based upon his emotions. He said he has never led the congregation in the pursuit of any large change that did not initially make him very queasy, like that moment on a roller coaster when you crest the top of the hill and then begin to fly downward at the speed of light.

There are so many reasons to hang onto the ball, to keep lying on the pallet, but sometimes you have to step out in faith, to take risks, have courage and attempt to do something great for God. That is precisely where we find ourselves as a congregation.

There is no question in my mind that we have been stuck. We have been far too comfortable for too long. And our comfort with each other, with our building, with our existing ministries has led to complacency and apathy. We do have some incredible vitality, and wonderful ministries, particularly for children, youth and missions. But we are still stuck and complacent. In the early 1960s nearly 3000 people would come pouring into this building on Sunday mornings for worship. Now we average 300 people. We find it very difficult to recruit new people for ministry teams, to find new leaders. Our passion for reaching out to new people has

diminished. To go from 3000 in worship to 300 in 50 years, well you can easily predict what the future will hold for us. I am firmly convinced, based upon my own research and observation that if we do not do something this church will surely die. Over 200 of our current members are over the age of 70. They are the saints of this church, the ones who built this church, who served, sacrificed, and we all owe them so very, very much. But they might not be with us in 25 years. We have 125 members over 80, and 30 members over 90. They are the heart and soul of our congregation, but several have shared that they do not see themselves being able to help with the creation of a new church. Nevertheless, many of them are visionary enough to see that we do need to take bold and courageous steps so that this church is not left to die.

I do not think that is what any of you want. No matter how opposed you may be to our plan for relocation, I do not think any of you want this church to die. And I do not believe that is God's will for us. I could not live with myself if I sat by and quietly allowed that to happen. That would not be faithful to my ordination vows or my understanding of what a spiritual leader is called to do

This past week, I was going through some of my files for our 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary last year, and I recalled that for a few months during 1919, this congregation did not exist. This church closed. I did not know that until I did research on our history last year. From the written records of Mrs. Lenore Heimke, one of the early members: "In October 1913, we first attended services there. We did not become active until Easter, 1916. Rev. Titmarsh died in the spring, and another minister, Rev. McClelland was sent to Wheat ridge. He came to Lakewood also, and reorganized the Sunday School. The work was not very encouraging, and in the spring of 1919 he closed the Lakewood church." "He closed the Lakewood church." "The following fall Rev. Gibbs came and reopened it. But the next winter, Rev. Gibbs also became discouraged and shook the dust of Lakewood from his feet, never to return."

Churches are more fragile than people realize, even ones with over 600 members. In 1919 this church closed, and it could have stayed closed. This congregation easily could have died. And it still could. We cannot allow that to happen, my friends. It is going to take all of us, investing, dreaming, believing and working together to determine the future of this congregation. I know it isn't easy, I know there is pain and sadness associated with the loss of this location and the comfort level that we have enjoyed for so long. But Jesus does not call us to be comfortable. He calls us to make disciples and make a difference. If we believe with all our

hearts that what we are called to share the liberating Gospel of love and peace, then we will have the courage to do whatever it takes to make sure this church is here for future generations, even if it scares us and makes us a bit nauseous at times.

Of course, it helps to remember that a change of this nature is not that new for us. Over the years this church has had to reinvent itself numerous times. We have been in 10 different locations and had many different names. All the while, our ministry has blessed and helped countless people, and it will continue to do so, with God's help and your support. It will take vision, it will take courage, it will take generosity, and sacrificial giving, but I am convinced it is a God given vision and it is the right thing to do.

Decades ago I did a funeral for a man and when I met with his family they said, "He was a good husband, good father, and friend. He was smart and had so many great ideas, but the sad thing was that he spent 45 years of his life in a job he hated." He never really lived up to his potential. It happens all the time, for lots of individuals and churches. So many churches really are social clubs that never live up to their potential to do great things for God. They do not have a passion for evangelism and making disciples, finding spiritually hungry people and sharing with them the illuminating love of Jesus Christ. It takes courage and willingness to risk if you are to live up to your potential as an individual, and as a church.

William Sloane Coffin has said that of all the Christian virtues, courage is the most important, because it makes all of the other virtues possible. Said late great actor John Wayne: Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway. And Doris Lessing, who just received the Nobel Prize for Literature at the age of 87, only the 11<sup>th</sup> woman to do so, said: "You must find the courage to swim against the collective stream of mediocrity and never resign yourself to the limitations imposed by others."

You know that pitcher I mentioned earlier? He finally let go of the ball, and he went on to have a great career in baseball. And that paralytic we heard about? Well, he did it! He got up, grabbed his stretcher and walked out of the house in Capernaum, with everyone watching and praising God. So what about us? I am absolutely certain that with God's help and with your help, we are going to build a new church in a new location and reach many, many people with the love of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Help us, generous God, to believe that we can be healed of our paralysis and do something truly great for you and your Kingdom. In the name of the living Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.