

“ All By Myself ”

18 September 2005

Luke 5: 17-20, 25-26 (*The Message*)

One day as Jesus was teaching, some people arrived carrying a paraplegic on a stretcher. They were looking for a way to get into the house and set him before Jesus. When they couldn't find a way in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof, removed some tiles, and let him down in the middle of everyone, right in front of Jesus. Impressed by their bold belief, he said, “Friend, I forgive you.”

...He now spoke directly to the paraplegic: “Get up. Take your bedroll and go home.” Without a moment's hesitation, he did it—got up, took his blanket, and left for home, giving glory to God all the way. The people rubbed their eyes, incredulous—and then also gave glory to God. Awestruck, they said, “We've never seen anything like that!”

Luke 11:9 (*TEV*)

“Ask and you'll receive...”

Have you asked anyone for help this week? That's a hard thing for me to do, but I was forced to the week I was working on this message. Isn't it strange how that happens? Much of my work and communication with our various teams and team members happens via the Internet. Well, my Internet connection wasn't working. After several days of trying to handle it on my own, and trying all the methods that had worked in the past, I finally gave up and called the cable company to check about our cable modem. It took a while, but we finally got a band-aid on the problem until they could get to our house to make a full repair.

Asking for help is hard for me, and I suspect it is for others. In fact, this message has been removed from the lineup of messages at least twice, mainly because I was sort of resisting dealing with it. There are a lot of reasons for that. One is that it seems to me that there's a fine line between helping in a positive way and creating co-dependency in an unhealthy way. And sometimes asking for help is a way for us to escape responsibility. I had to go to worship team and ask for help from them to resolve this disconnect in my heart and mind, and then I asked Jeeves to help me find some decent material to use.

Those of you who have been around The Garden for a while know that I try hard not to ever tell jokes that are in any way demeaning to anyone, unless, of course, it's me, or pastor-types. However, for today, I'm asking for your forgiveness and indulgence as I violate my own personal code of ethics.

We're really thinking today about asking for and receiving help, so I couldn't resist temptation and pass up this opportunity to share this joke with you. Do you know why it's a good thing that there are now women astronauts? Because when the crew gets lost in space, there will be someone willing to ask directions. Ba-dum-bump...

Asking for directions is one way that demonstrates how many of us—men and women--are reluctant to ask for something. I'm guessing that's because we tend to put a high value on being strong and self-reliant. We think asking for help with anything could be an indication of weakness.

In many ways, we may be acting a lot like our daughter did when she was a toddler and was trying very hard to be independent. I would be in a hurry for us to get in the car and go someplace, but she wasn't quite ready yet. Typically, she didn't have her shoes on, and she absolutely would not let anyone else help her. Since this was before Velcro for shoe closures, when she had to learn to tie her own shoelaces, that undertaking seemed to me to take forever! Every time I even approached her about letting me help, she'd say, "I do it myself, Mommy."

Now in many ways, that's an appropriate thing and a good thing. We have to learn to do things for ourselves, because we're not always going to have Mommy around to help us. However, that seems to be something that many of us never outgrow. We refuse to ask anyone for anything, and assume that if we did, we'd be seen as weak, needy people. Even though we appreciate those who are helpful to others, we'd prefer being what we perceive as strong rather than appearing needy. Most of the time, we find it much easier to give than to receive.

Don Miller, author of the book *Blue Like Jazz*, tells a story that points out what I mean. He talks about being in line at the checkout of a grocery store, watching the customer in front of him open her wallet and take out food stamps to pay for her groceries. It was obvious that everyone—the customer, the clerk and the man standing behind her watching—everyone was uncomfortable with the interaction. The woman never lifted her head as she organized her bags of groceries and set them into her cart.

Don wrote that he wanted very much to pay for her groceries, but he knew, or at least he sensed, that she really didn't like having to take the help that the government or anyone else could provide. She probably felt self-conscious, and suspected that were feeling sorry for her.

After he left the store, Don Miller realized that he had pity for the woman, but he was the one who deserved the pity. He said, "I love to give charity, but I don't want to be charity." In other words, he liked to help others, but found it difficult to receive from others, and maybe even to receive the gift of God's unconditional love.

Miller found it very hard to accept help, to receive, and I suspect that's true for many of us. Think about if someone pays us a compliment or says something nice, most of us have trouble accepting that and just saying "thank you." We tend to try to undermine a compliment with something like, "Oh, it really was easy....it was nothing," or something on that order.

The story in our Bible passage offers another way for us to live and act. The paralyzed man clearly had a desire for things to be different, and he believed that Jesus could have a hand in making that happen. With the crowds that always surrounded the man from Galilee, it was impossible for many to get close enough to him to get his attention. What chance did someone struggling with paralysis have of getting to Jesus?

The answer is simply none, at least not if he tried to do it all by himself. Obviously, he made his plight known, and asked for a little help from his friends. And they stepped up, probably because he was so very clear on exactly what he needed. Because he asked, they got creative and found a way to get the man in front of Jesus, and he experienced all he'd hoped for and more. He couldn't have done it by himself; he needed help.

Our second Bible passage is familiar to many of us in one form or another. It says "Ask and you

will receive.” Now this is Jesus speaking, and he’s specifically talking about prayer and asking God for help. As you may recall, writer Anne Lamott says one of her favorite prayers to God is “Help me! Help me! Help me!” In a very real way, that’s what the paralyzed man was asking, and when he asked, he received the help he needed.

Even though we may feel awkward and uneasy about it, asking for and receiving help really is a sign of strength, rather than weakness. It really should be a perfectly natural way for us to live. After all, we’re dependent on one another, and we can’t make it through life without the help of others, and certainly without the help of God. I don’t believe that trying to do it all by ourselves is what God intended.

I wonder if being open to asking and receiving help isn’t a mark of our willingness to recognize the reality that we’re not really as in charge of things as we like to think we are. I wonder if asking isn’t one way that we put ourselves in touch with our higher nature, a Higher Power. Maybe one of those essential steps of any 12-step program would be an important thing for all of us to embrace.

There’s something else about being willing to ask for help, and that’s that it has a way of connecting us in meaningful ways with God and with one another. Always seeming invincible and invulnerable has a way of separating us from others, and maybe even from God. Joseph Campbell had it right when he said, “To separate oneself...is to set oneself against wholeness.” One way we separate ourselves and never risk true relationship is by thinking we can do all by ourselves.

It’s like a story I heard about a college football player who lost his leg to cancer, and along with it, his ability to play football. Even though he was no longer able to play, his coach came to visit him every week. The player began to get more and more uncomfortable with the whole thing, and finally said to his coach, “Coach, you don’t have to take care of me. I can get by on my own.”

The coach thought a moment, and then responded, “In football, receiving is every bit as important as passing. Off the field, asking for and receiving the help you need is just as important as giving help to others. You know how important it is to help your teammates in a game...It’s the same way in life. Besides, think what you can do for me by letting me know your needs.” Acknowledging that we need one another is a way that we can draw closer to one another, and to God.

And one more thing..and that’s for us to realize that when we ask God for help, it may well come to us through another person or persons. You may be familiar with the name of Jerri Nielsen. She was the doctor who chose to spend a year at the South Pole, partly to escape from the heartache at home. While she was virtually thousands of miles from civilization, she discovered what receiving from others is all about. She diagnosed herself with breast cancer, and even began her own treatment in that distant place. Here she was ailing, facing serious health challenges, limping along trying to help those with her on the South Pole when she could barely manage herself.

In her book *Icebound*, she talked about something that happened very late in the season when supplies had begun to run low, and before she could be rescued and taken to safety. She said that the last of fresh foods was long gone and greenhouse production was sporadic at best. At dinner one evening, each person there was presented with two small leaves of lettuce and one

cherry tomato from the hothouse garden. She said, "You have no idea how long a person can chew on one leaf of lettuce until you have gone without for months. "

She wrote, "I was so touched when Reza walked over to me and placed his portion on my plate. Then Wendy and Big did the same. It was one of the greatest gifts that I have ever received."

"Ask and you shall receive." Know that, with God, we will always receive. Are we ready to ask?

Closing:

Oftentimes here we talk about how important it is to share with others, but sometimes we fail to talk about how equally important it is to learn to receive. God is at the ready, offering us love, offering us hope, and God is at work through each and every one of us. Maybe as we leave here this morning, we might think about asking for help, and then opening our arms and receiving that which is so lovingly offered.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.