

"Did you find everything you need?" the happy cashier asked me as I began to unload my groceries from the cart onto the belt at the check out counter. "Well, let's see," I thought to myself, "Everything I need? No, I didn't find those extra few hours of sleep I could really use...I didn't find any extra cash in my pants pockets before I did the laundry...I didn't find a way to bring back 70 degree temperature in the middle of this terrible winter. But I guess I did find the milk and bread and eggs."

"Did you find everything you need?" In today's gospel, the four friends are pretty sure they know what their companion needs. He needs to be healed – healed from his paralysis. And they believe Jesus is the one person who can do it. Unfortunately, knowing *about* Jesus and getting *to* Jesus are two different things. Mark tells us, "So many were gathered around the home where Jesus was that there was no longer room for them, not even in the front door."

However, that doesn't stop the friends. With a confidence born out of need, they find another way to Jesus – dropping their friend down through an opening they've made in the roof.

When all that is done, they probably think their worries are over. "We've gotten him this far. Now it's up to Jesus. Just as he healed so many people the last time he was in Capernaum, so now, he will surely help our friend." But Jesus' response may have surprised them. Looking at their friend, he says, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Well, forgiveness is nice – but we'd really hoped that our friend would walk!"

And the friends aren't the only ones surprised. The scribes are stunned as well, asking, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It's blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

The friends wanted a healer. The scribes wanted a law-abiding teacher. Both were surprised. Jesus assumed the role of God – offering what God offers – breaking through the barrier of our sin to heal our entire lives.

We come this day with many needs, many hopes. Perhaps you're here because it's a long held habit...without really thinking about it, it's what you do on Sundays. Perhaps you're here because a friend has invited you.

Perhaps you're searching for a spiritual home. Perhaps you're not sure why you've come. With our own stories and questions, our own hopes and doubts, somehow, we've found ourselves in this place.

And like the paralyzed man or the scribes in our gospel lesson, we too may be surprised at the word that Jesus offers: "Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven." "Forgiveness? I really wanted healing. I just wanted a sermon with a couple of good insights. I wanted to sing a familiar hymn or hear a prayer that would be comforting. What's this forgiveness stuff?"

In a way, forgiveness feels a bit out of fashion. It's passé, unnecessary. I mean, if we keep out of trouble, do our best at home and work, if we live respectable lives and mind our own business – why do we need forgiveness? Can't we just make it on our own?

Oh, in lots of ways, our world tells us that we can. If we just work hard enough, make a good living, buy the right house in the right neighborhood, get a promotion or two, raise some good kids...that's all we need. We can make it on our own.

And we believe that to be true. And then, the first thing we hear in this place of worship is a word of forgiveness. It's a pretty odd greeting if you think about it – like going to a friend's house for dinner... and having them greet you at the door, "Welcome, I forgive you."

And yet, it's perhaps only through such a shocking word that we are startled into an honest appraisal of things.

In God's love, we are invited to be honest about our lives, to admit that we don't always get it right, that we don't have it all together. We struggle...we fail. We know we shouldn't overindulge in food or drink, but sometimes we can't seem to stop ourselves. We know we should get more exercise, but we don't. We know we should turn off the TV or the computer and put more energy into relationships – with

family, with the lonely, the poor – but there seems to be this magnet holding us to the couch.

We know we don't need any more clothes or jewelry or toys – that our dollars would be better used to fight hunger, to support mission – but that latest sale just seemed too good to pass up....and we're so good at

convincing ourselves that what we want is really what we need. We know that we should begin each day with prayer but we turn over and sleep a bit longer...or if we think we should pray at night before we go to bed...we find ourselves too tired and nodding off in front of the TV.

And even when we do the right thing, sin seems to be lurking close behind. We show unconditional love to another... and then we are so proud of ourselves at how compassionate we are. We accomplish an important and meaningful task... and then we revel in how good we've done and how talented we are. We have the strongest work ethic around....but then never take a Sabbath rest. We just can't seem to trust that God will take care of this world without our help.

We sin. And sometimes our experience of sin is so strong that we find ourselves exclaiming with the Apostle Paul: "Wretched person that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (OK...maybe we don't go that far, but we acknowledge our sinfulness.) Paul is pretty clear that we can't do it ourselves. It's only through our relationship with Christ that we find deliverance from the condition we're in.

Today – actually every Sunday – is a celebration of freedom: freedom known in a relationship with Christ, freedom extended with the words, "Son, daughter, your sins are forgiven."

Still, you might be wondering, "What does this freedom from sin really mean?" I don't know about you, but it hasn't meant that I've stopped sinning. No, I take that back...I DO know about you and it hasn't stopped you from sinning either. We struggle. Even when we're joined to Christ through faith, we still sin. We wrestle with the same old sins: with envy, greed, laziness, pride. We still fight sin tooth and nail. This freedom is not a freedom from ever sinning again.

On the other hand, the freedom we celebrate as Christians doesn't mean a release from responsibility. "Just do whatever you want, whatever feels good because grace abounds!" No! The grace we know in Christ Jesus doesn't give us license to sin. Actually, Jesus often sharpens our responsibilities. He expands the demands on us...he expects more from us.

No, the freedom Christ offers isn't freedom from responsibility; it isn't freedom from ever having to struggle with sin again. The freedom of the gospel is the freedom of forgiveness – a freedom from guilt, a freedom from anxiety before God, a freedom from fear of condemnation.

And that makes all the difference.

Imagine, for a moment, what it might be like to live and work under two different sorts of bosses. The first calls the worker and says, "Your job today will be to clear this field of stones. You will only be paid if you work without stopping until the entire field is clear. I'll be standing here all day to make sure you're working. And, if your work isn't good enough, you'll be punished."

Now, the second boss calls the worker and says, "Good news! I have chosen you to be a shareholder in my company. Your salary and your future are guaranteed. Today, our job is to clear this field of stones. I'll be working right along side you. Together we can get it done."

Which yoke sounds easier? No, Christ is not talking about freedom from work, or even from pain or labor. He's talking about freedom from guilt and fear – a life that is secure in the eternal love of God.

Yes, we come here to day with many needs and hopes. But our deepest need is a word of grace. And that word comes to us through scripture. It is a word which makes us whole, that word which enables us to "rise up and walk." Set free by God's word of forgiveness and grace...set free to work in God's fields – not because there are stones to be moved...but because Christ has called us to work along side him.

So be it for us.