

FOLLOWING

Lift Series (Part 1) | Mark 2:1-12

Good morning. Over these next several weeks, I invite you to go on a journey with me and the people around you to lift our faith and discipleship to a new level; to express that growth with our stewardship — with the way we use our resources; and to open ourselves in a deeper way to the gravity-defying grace of God.

It has been nearly seven years since we've had a conversation like this at Christ Church. At that time, there was no Christ Church Butterfield. There was no Atrium and Auditorium or beautiful Narthex in Oak Brook. We hadn't yet renovated schools in Kenya or funded the ministry to under-resourced kids we now call Resilient. We hadn't yet elevated the livestream capability more than a thousand of you are enjoying today or contemplated that a coming pandemic would make that capability so important. Many hundreds of us who now call Christ Church our spiritual home weren't even here. Some who are now among our most influential leaders, hadn't yet risen up.

And then miracles of grace and generosity brought into being all these good things. These blessings did not just HAPPEN accidentally. They came into being because back in 2016, this congregation held a series of daring, sometimes even uncomfortable conversations in our worship services and small groups about what it might look like to *"TAKE ROOT more deeply in Christ for the sake of others."*

Whether for the first time, or for another time, I'm inviting you into that sort of daring reflection. I'm asking you to think about how God might LIFT your faith and discipleship (and the financial stewardship that flows from that) so that He can LIFT thousands of others toward their God-given potential. I want you to be able to look back a few years from now on the next movement of God's grace through this church and be able to say: ***Jesus used ME to help all this good happen.***

A key to all this, of course, is your actually being IN this conversation. Twenty years ago, attending worship for five weeks in a row would have been a no-brainer for most committed Christians; today, that probably feels like a big commitment. I'm asking you for that. ***Can you commit to being here in-person (preferably) or online, every week through February 12?*** I'm pretty sure I could make that commitment to *Yellowstone* or the *NFL*. This series is infinitely more important for us individually, as a church, and for the thousands people God wants to use us to LIFT up.

To help all of us get the most from the conversation we'll have, we've put together a wonderful RESOURCE BOOKLET. I'm going to ask our ushers to pass that out to you now. We'll also supply a DIGITAL LINK for those of you online. This is your own personal booklet. I encourage you to write your name on it, to write in it, and to bring it with you each week to worship and when you go to your small group.

As you'll see, this booklet has lots of information about the LIFT initiative. It also has a COMMITMENT CARD that I invite you to start praying over as you seek God's leading about your role in our church's future. My wife Amy and I are wrestling with what that bold step of faith looks like for us. As I shared in our Vision Video earlier, our primary goal is to engage 100% of us who call Christ Church our spiritual home in helping to advance our ministry vision in some way. If we are going to achieve the wonderful outcomes we have envisioned, every one of us is needed to play some part. My question for you is: ***Will you commit today to at least make a commitment at whatever level God leads you to?***

Over the past months, we've held a variety of gatherings where we've talked with many leaders and key volunteers of our church about the aims of our LIFT Initiative. We've asked them to set an example by going first with their commitment. Many of us will be doing that on Friday January 27 at a special event we've calling Advance Commitment Night. I want to underline that this is not an exclusive event. Anyone is welcome to join us for this evening of worship and fellowship, if you are ready to make an advanced commitment. Details about this evening are available through the LIFT website and at our LIFT HUB.

Right now, I welcome you to turn to page 20 in your LIFT booklet, where you'll find a guide to the brief message from God's Word I want to share with you before you go on your way today. Before we plunge in, please join me in a brief word of prayer... *Great God, we are opening our hearts and minds and whole lives to you right now. Speak to us through your Word and by the power of your Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.*

In the second chapter of the Good News according to Mark, we read this story that we touched on last week and I want to explore in a different way today: ***¹ A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and Jesus preached the word to them.***

Some years ago, two friends from and I got out of a taxi in Beijing, China, and met a man who would be our escort. He led us down a side street bustling with food stalls, then down a narrower one still, and then through an alleyway between low-slung concrete buildings. Dodging crates and ducking hanging laundry, we finally came to a place in the alley blocked by a clot of people who were spilling out of a doorway.

We peered through a window into the foyer and larger back room of a small house. A single naked lightbulb dangled on a cord from the ceiling—illuminating the faces of some 70 people crammed into those two tiny rooms, facing a man who spoke from an open Bible. Mothers and fathers held children on their laps. Wizen-faced elders sat on tiny stools. Teens and young adults stood along the wall, while others peered

through the doorway from outside. People there were pressed so tightly against one another that it was hard to discern whose knees and elbows belonged to whom. The Body of Christ.

These people could have lost their jobs, been publicly shamed, jailed, tortured or killed, just for being there. But like the scripture story: **They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door.** All these people had come to that place for one daring reason: They wanted to know Jesus. They wanted their minds and hearts filled by his Word. They wanted to live their lives by the vision and values of a kingdom greater than the empire that was trying to dominate them. They knew they needed the eternal Word of God to lift their souls. They knew they needed a community of love and instruction to raise their children. They knew they needed a supernatural power that could lift them up when they were anxious or discouraged or growing old or actually dead. They might have put it in different words, but these came looking for a grace greater than the gravity of life.

So it was in that house church that gathered in Capernaum, as **Jesus preached the word to them.** So I pray it is here in this house. Why DO you come here, by the way? I hope it is because you've found that Jesus has for you and your loved ones a grace greater than all heavy things of your life. I pray that's become so real for you that – if not yet today, but soon -- you're not just a FAN but a FOLLOWER of Jesus. I pray that you're someone like those Chinese Christians or those believers in Capernaum who were so devoted to Christ that they were willing to take risks and endure discomforts and alter their patterns in order to get closer to him and to honor his call.

You know what really blew me away that day in Beijing? It's what those Jesus followers did toward us. To my eyes, there was no more room inside that place. They'd gotten there first and we'd come late. They were family and we were strangers. They shared a language we did not know how to speak. We didn't look like them, dress like them, sound like them. They did not know our stories yet. We could not offer one thing to them. But they looked at us with love. They beckoned us forward. They reached out, put their hands upon us, and LIFTED us. Literally. They crowd-surfed us to the front of the inner room – to the place where the Word of God was being shared – because, I believe, they wanted to see us lifted in all the ways that only GOD can.

Mark's Gospel goes on to say: **³ Some men came, bringing to Jesus a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.** Now there's a lot of information in that one verse. There are these four guys who know someone who is weighed down in a way that he not able to overcome on his own. We don't know whether he was paralyzed from birth, or was hit by a Roman chariot, or got drunk and fell off a roof. But how he developed his problem seems to matter a lot less to these guys than where he might find help. Their friend is dealing with unusual gravity that will require unusual grace to fix and they see JESUS as the source of that kind of help.

So they reached, put their hands upon him or the mat he's lying on, and did what? That's right, they LIFTED him – together. This man was afflicted with a gravity too heavy for one person to overcome, so they resolved to LIFT TOGETHER. I don't know how far they had to carry him. I think of heavy periods in my life when certain people have had to carry me pretty far. Who in your life has lifted or carried you?

But, then, these guys come down the equivalent of the Beijing alley and discover that the way to Jesus is blocked. And the Bible says that: **⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd...** they dumped him on the ground, shrugged, and walked away saying, "Hey, we tried. You can only expect us to go so far!" Do you remember that part of the story? No you don't, because that's not what happened. Scriptures says, **they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on.**

Are you reading between the lines here? How are they suddenly on the roof? Did we miss the line about the elevator? No, houses in the first century mid-East had steps that ran up the side of them. So you can just see these guys huffing and puffing as they haul the dead-weight of their paralyzed friend up the staircase, trying not to fall off the side of the stairs themselves. Then they manage to break up the plaster surface layer, and cut their way through the thatching, and painstakingly and carefully lower this man down to the feet of Jesus.

And the Bible says that: **⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."** As our preachers observed last week, the greatest weight all of us need lifted is the gravity of sin. A lot of our external problems or our inability to deal more constructively with them comes from the anxiety, anger or pride that paralyzes us within. But, then, Jesus says, just so you know that I have the authority to lift that weight from your life, **He said to the man, ¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"**

What do you suppose the application is for us in all of this? What does it have to do with what we're calling our LIFT Initiative? Let me summarize and close for today. There are a lot of people feeling the weight of sin and the heaviness of life today. There are kids who need guidance, relationships that need renewing, families with special needs who long for help, spiritually or materially poor people who need a LIFT and more. We want to lift the quality of our ministries and the campuses we do them from. The good news is that there is supernatural grace for this and Jesus is the source. But Christ continues to work through actual bodies, through specific human hands, through hearts that don't give up when the going is hard – like those people in Beijing, like those guys on the roof, like you and me. We've set some big hairy audacious goals for this Initiative, but what Christ can do through all of us when we LIFT TOGETHER is truly awesome.

Let me close with an image we'll use often in this series. *Hold up your hand and look at it.* There are Five Fingers of Faith which, if we exercise them, will enable us to be Christ's lifting hand in the lives of others. *Now grab your thumb.* The first and most important finger of faith is the decision that I will really FOLLOW wherever God leads. Like those disciples in Capernaum. Like those people in Beijing. Like so many faithful people have done through the history of this congregation.

Here's the truth: I don't personally know WHAT you are called to give of yourself to advance Christ's purposes through this remarkable church. But Jesus does. He'll show you, if you ask Him earnestly. So, at the start of this journey: ***Lift your eyes to Jesus and resolve: I will FOLLOW where You lead me.*** You don't need to be afraid of that promise because Jesus wants to take us all to a wonderful place – with a grace that is greater than the gravity of life.