

What We Do For One Another

A couple of weeks ago Kathy Koehler went with her husband and her wheelchair bound son Rob to a hot new restaurant in Atlantic City. Let's just say if I mentioned the name you'd recognize the brand. There were three flights of stairs to get into the main entrance. When they asked where the handicapped entrance was, they were directed to the elevators in the attached hotel. Making their way through the hotel lobby to the elevators, they were told the elevators were only for the use of registered guests. At this point, I would have given up in disgust, but Rob really wanted to go to that restaurant, so his dad and two other people carried him up the three flights of stairs in his wheelchair so he could get in. They would do whatever it took to get the one they loved what he needed. This is what life has been like for Kathy and her husband and Rob for the forty two years since Rob was born.

Two of the major challenges of dealing with disability are dependence and accessibility. Those are issues for all of us to one extent or another. Can I get where I need to go and access the information I need to access? Can I do it myself or do I need to depend on someone else? We live in a culture that teaches you can do whatever you want to – that's what we tell our children, isn't it? We value independence – from the time we're little kids on up, we proclaim "I can do it myself." Maybe the quintessential image of the freedom we value is the guy on the motorcycle heading down the highway, depending on no one, free to go wherever he wants. Yet for most of us, maybe for all of us, those values aren't quite true. We can't physically go anywhere we want to go. We are limited by our bodies' abilities. We can't do it all ourselves. We are finite and limited beings. We aren't God, no matter how much we would like to be. And for a person with a significant disability, whether that disability is physical or intellectual, those limitations are greater. Many places others can go without even thinking about it you can't get into because there are steps or a heavy

door to open. There are things you need help figuring out. Your access is limited and you need help in order to fully be able to use the gifts and abilities you do have. Those who are fortunate find the help they need.

The paralyzed man lay on his pallet. He could no more walk to the house where Jesus was staying than he could fly. But his four friends decided that he needed to see Jesus. So they each took a corner of the pallet and carried him as they had carried him around Capernaum for years. When they got to the house, the crowd was packed around the door. There was no way to get in. But they would do whatever it took to get their friend what he needed. They went around the back and found the steps that led to the flat roof. They carefully slid the pallet up, almost dropping the man who laid on it, but they managed to get him up there. Then a couple of them ran home for tools for the next part of the job. They began chipping a hole through the brick and wood of the roof.

One of the minor surprises of this story is that no one seemed to notice what was happening. Apparently Jesus just kept on teaching, although one can imagine the disciples and the homeowner glancing up anxiously at what was going on above their heads. Finally the hole was big enough and slowly, carefully, the paralyzed man's friends lowered him down on his bed to rest at Jesus feet. They had done everything they could to get the one they loved the help he needed.

All around the country, all around the world, are people with a wide variety of disabilities trying to live the best, most meaningful, most productive lives they can. And right there beside them are the people who help them do just that. These are the caregivers. It starts with the families, with the parents and spouses and siblings who from the day their child is born give all they have to do their best for their loved one. That care giving can be exhausting work, whether you are caring for a loved one slipping not-so-gently into Alzheimer's, or

pushing a wheelchair, or arguing once again with the bureaucracy to get the services you need, or day by day showing up for low-paid work as you support someone through the day or just taking the time to listen as someone makes their way through a life they can no longer control. Your arms get tired. Your spirit gets tired. These caregivers aren't saints. They have faults and failings like everyone else. But they'll do whatever it takes to get the one they love what they need.

Jesus finally stops talking and looks at the man at his feet. Then he looks up through the hole in the ceiling to the faces peering down. Mark says, "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the blind man, "Child, your sins are forgiven." That leads to the rest of the story, a controversy with the scribes, and I don't want to go into that this morning. What I want to lift up is that it was because of the faith of his friend that this man got what he needed. Not his own faith, the faith of his friends who had done whatever they could to get the one they loved what he needed most.

Fred Craddock said, "It is not (the faith) of the paralytic but of those who brought him. Here is the church in miniature: a person being sustained by the faith of others when his or her own condition – physical, spiritual or mental – is at least temporarily far short of sufficient."

To be held up by the faith of another – what a gift and a blessing. To know you will be supported when on your own you would fall. To know you will be carried to the place you can find wholeness and healing – what joy! All of us need help at one time or another. All of us can offer help at one time or another. It's when we hold each other up – or lower each other carefully down, as happened in today's gospel – that we truly become the church. That work of offering care in the particular way that is needed is holy work. It is what Jesus does for us, and calls us to do for one another.

This morning there are people here who are caregivers. There are others who receive that care every day. Many of us are doing both at the same time –

receiving care on the one hand so we can have the strength we need to offer care on the other hand. This is the way God made us – to be a community of interdependence, offering care as it is needed, receiving care as it is offered in a continual, mutual dance of weakness and strength, giving and receiving, to form a moving, breathing circle of love and care.

May you always find yourself lifted up and lowered down by another when you need it. May you find the faith and strength to lift others up and lower them down in their turn. This is what it is to be the community of Christ.