



chapter 6

the touch that raises and releases us

Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven. . . . I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.”

—Mark 2:3-5,11

There are times when we want to turn to God, when we need to pray, when we know God is offering help, but we cannot seem to move. We cannot reach out a hand to take God’s gift. We cannot summon up the will or the energy to do something positive for ourselves.

Perhaps this inner paralysis arises from depression. Or we may be deeply grieving. Perhaps we are too exhausted, overwhelmed by events so out of control that no choice seems right. Some people are caught and held powerless by addiction. Many give up on themselves, feeling it is too late to change. This inner spiritual, emotional paralysis may be only a temporary block, but for some it lasts for years.

As I reread this story of the healing of the paralytic, an old prayer poem, said by children for generations, came to mind. Sometimes as a child I said this prayer when I did not want to be bothered with more serious prayer at bedtime:

Four angels 'round my bed,
two at my feet, two at my head.
Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
bless the bed that I lie on.

Guiltily I would feel that this was a superficial, poor excuse for a prayer, but it was probably better than nothing. Now I wonder if this prayer is deeper than I realized. It gives witness to the love, both human and divine, that holds and supports us especially when we are the most vulnerable and powerless, as in sleep and at other times when we cannot help ourselves.

I wonder if the paralyzed man remembered some equivalent Hebrew prayer as his four friends lifted his mat and carried him to Jesus. We do not know if he had asked for their help. It might not have occurred to him that anything could be done for him. Or he might not have been able to speak, or he might even have been unconscious. It was *their* faith that carried him. It was their

faith and determination that lifted him up the steps to the roof when they saw that crowds blocked the door to the house. It was their determination that dug through the roof, “made an opening,” as some translations put it.

We can imagine Jesus’ face as he watched the four men breathing heavily, sweating as they lowered the helpless man in front of him. He looked first at them, seeing the power of their faith that had carried the human burden through the streets, hauled him to the roof, scratched a hole through the plaster, and brought him to Jesus’ feet.

I think of people who have nearly died, or remained unconscious for a long time, or are recovering from anesthesia, or are convalescing after a stroke, who later tell us how deeply aware they were of the strength and love of those who cared for them—the ones who held their hands, talked to them, read to them, prayed with them when they could not respond.

I think of those times when I have felt stalled, unclear, too tired to make decisions or to think or pray deeply. This has sometimes happened in the midst of writing a book. Inspiration dries up; nothing moves. The temptation is to let the project drop, or to push myself with willpower and gritted teeth and produce a dead book. I am learning at these times to contact one or two trusted friends and ask them to carry me for awhile in prayer. Or I may ask them to sit and talk with me about my confused and blocked condition, *not* to tell me what to do, but to listen prayerfully, ask clarifying questions, and share perceptions. It is a miracle how such prayer and sharing opens the roof of whatever is

blocking me. It is a miracle how the healing flow is released within me.

Sometimes, though, those who care about us need to be more assertive as they carry us. Some people are caught and paralyzed in downward spirals of depression or addiction. One woman did not fully understand what was happening to her. Each day it was harder to get out of bed. Her job and family responsibilities became impossible to fulfill. Letters and unpaid bills piled up. Vaguely she knew that prayer, exercise, and stress reduction would help, but the very thought of these actions made her tired. Family members did their best to help her, shouldering more than their share of household tasks, but the situation just grew worse.

Finally the family came to her rescue. One evening they all sat down with her and told her honestly what they saw happening to her and them. With loving firmness they insisted she see a physician and a therapist. They made the appointments, and one of them went with her to the physician to take notes. Tests showed an underactive thyroid, and prescribed medication helped enormously. She also began, with a therapist's help, to explore early unhealed emotional wounds that had festered deep in her heart for many years. She began to pray, not long meditations but talking to God through the day, sharing with God how she felt. When fatigue overcame her, she learned to sit down for a few minutes; take a few slow, deep breaths; and help her body release its stiffness. She began to feel new hope and strength. Eventually she decided to change jobs and enrolled in a stress

reduction course. For a long time her way of praying did not include long meditations or lengthy intercessions but talking to God at intervals through the day. As she bathed, dressed, ate her meals, drove to work, and lay down to sleep, she thought of these daily actions as symbols of God's loving care enfolding and guiding her. Sometimes she imagined herself resting on a green hillside, breathing in the greenness and the light of God.

"It was God through my family who carried me out of that dark despair," she said later. "They lovingly told me the truth; they carried me with their faith and love when I could do nothing for myself. They carried me until I could begin to move again and make choices for myself."

If we are accustomed to the serving, giving role, it is extraordinarily hard to learn to be served, carried, even for a short time. But when we do allow our friends to pick us up in our emotional or spiritual paralysis and carry us to the sources of healing, we are brought closer to our humanity—a word I like better than humility.

This story of the paralyzed man is one of the few times that Jesus connects sin to illness. In most of his healings he does not make this connection, but in this case he saw that the man needed forgiveness as well as healing. The man needed a special kind of release.

What is more, Jesus called the man "son." Seldom did he call someone son or daughter. I think that he did so on occasions when he knew the person carried a lot of inner shame (deserved or not) and needed the intimate tenderness of being a son or

daughter to Jesus. Perhaps this man carried an uncleansed burden of wrongdoing and, because of his sudden illness, he had not been able to repent publicly or make restitution. As usual, Jesus saw beyond the outer bodily affliction to the inner need and touched him on those deeper levels.

What faithful persons in our own lives have been present to give us their strength when we had none? Did they come to us separately or together? Did the help come from people or another source, such as the beauty and power of nature, mountains, trees, rivers, stars, gardens? Or did God touch us through a special book, music, art, a beloved animal? God reaches us through many avenues of love when we feel powerless.

When my husband was receiving a blood transfusion in a room full of patients undergoing chemotherapy, suddenly the door opened, and in walked a woman with a huge dog that had curly, long white hair. She told us she had rescued him as an abandoned and abused puppy. He seemed to feel a special love for the sick and weak. Several times a week she brought her dog to the chemotherapy room. We watched him slowly walk from person to person. He would stand in front of each person, looking up into his or her face with loving, thoughtful eyes. Occasionally he would lay his head briefly on someone's knee. After he and his owner (a former nurse) left, we all felt as if a special angel had walked among us. A new light and warmth suffused the room.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes to us directly. When we face a situation that we know is too big for us, whose challenge we cannot meet with human wisdom or strength, we can pray what I call the Prayer of the Rope's End:

God, this is too big for me. Take over. *Take over all the way.*
I give myself to your strong heart. Lift me, pray for me,
enfold me.

The result of this prayer is miraculous. God's own self picks us up, makes an opening, brings us to the Source: God brings us to God in our great weakness. As Romans 8:26 says,

The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Reflection and Meditation

I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.

—Mark 2:11

Rest your body, your whole self, on the underlying strength of God. Breathe slowly and fully, then naturally. Every breath is God's Spirit breathing into you.

When you feel ready, recall a time when you were so tired, depressed, or confused that you could not make choices or do anything to help yourself. Think of a time when even prayer seemed too much of an effort, a time when your inner strength was gone. Perhaps you remember a time when you felt powerless in just one aspect of your life. What happened? Did someone reach out to you? Did someone or something give you strength until you could move again, reach out, stand on your feet, and make choices?

As you reflect on that time, do you feel God was reaching out

and touching you through those helpers? Did help come in some other way? Did God's Spirit come directly and carry you?

Rest quietly, and give grateful thanks for the help that came, in whatever way it came. Look with God at this experience and reflect on its meaning.

Do you feel a sense of powerlessness in any part of your life right now? Is there some area in your life in which you cannot seem to move, change, or make choices even if you want to? Tell God how you feel. Say with honesty to God that you feel powerless over part of your life. Tell God if you feel that your whole life has become stalled, inert.

Ask God to take over that part of your life, to take over your whole life and carry you with the power of the Holy Spirit, to pray in you and for you. Ask God to send you others who will share their strength with you for a while until your strength returns. Rest in God, knowing that help and empowerment are already enfolding you.

Look at the days to come. Do you face a situation that seems too much for you, too overwhelming? A doctor's appointment? a new responsibility? a family problem? something else?

Ask the risen Jesus to go ahead of you and prepare the way, the time, the place. Think of the Christ in that future place, filling it with light and strength, so that when you get there, you will feel peace and empowerment.

Rest quietly, gently breathing God's breath. Know that God already holds that future experience in God's healing hands and heart. When you feel ready, slowly and quietly return from your meditation.