

## HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

MARCH 20, 2022

MARK 2: 1-12

### “WHAT IS YOUR ROOF?”

One of my favorite novelists is the Polish-British author, Joseph Conrad. He grew up in the middle of Poland, far from any ocean, but from childhood on dreamed of being a sea captain. When he was still quite little, his father in 1868 gave him the gift of a beautiful map of Africa. In 1868 parts of central Africa had not yet been explored by Europeans----so right in the middle of the map there was a white spot showing where the unexplored areas were. The child studied the map and saw that the huge Congo River flowed from the Atlantic Ocean into the unexplored blank area. He put his finger on the blank area and proclaimed to his father, “When I will grow up, I will sail there!” And he did. As an adult he moved to England and eventually became a sea captain. And one day, he sailed his ship right up the Congo River into that blank area on the map. (Joseph Conrad; 3 Lives, Frederick Kael, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979, p. 105). Joseph Conrad decided what he was going to do---and he did it!

In our gospel reading today from Mark 2, there was similar determination shown by the paralyzed man. He made a decision to do something and he did it. He heard Jesus was in Capernaum teaching in a house and healing people. The paralytic made a firm decision to get to Jesus to get healed.

But it wasn't easy. He was paralyzed. He couldn't walk, so how to get to Jesus? Well, he recruited friends who agreed to carry him across the city on a pallet to get to Jesus. But when they got to the house, it was totally packed out with people listening to Jesus preaching inside. They couldn't possibly get in. But the paralytic was very determined. So he had his friends somehow carry him up on the roof of the house! Now he had almost achieved his goal--he was right above the head of Jesus. But an obvious problem---there was a roof in the way! But even that didn't stop this determined man. He had his friends tear out part of the roof and then lower him down right in front of Jesus.

Imagine what a weird scene it was! Jesus is preaching away to the huge

crowd....and suddenly parts of the roof start falling down on everyone. Soon there is a big hole in the ceiling and, lo and behold, down comes the paralytic through the hole, lowered by his friends!

Did the Lord get upset and say something like---“What in the world are you doing? You can’t just bust the roof and come down and interrupt my sermon!” No, not at all. He looked at the paralytic and loved him. And He forgave his sins and healed his disease.

The paralytic wanted to get to Jesus. He would let nothing stop him. Can’t walk? He had friends to carry him. Was the house so crowded he couldn’t get in? So up to the roof! Roof in the way—tear it out! He was determined to reach his goal---he reached it! He got to Jesus and he got healed.

What keeps you and me from getting closer to the Lord? What is my roof—what gets in my way? What is your roof?

If we’re honest we know what our roof is---our sins are the barrier. Sin is totally bad. St. John Chrysostom wrote---“only one thing is totally worthy of sadness---sin.” (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, Vol. X, Intervarsity Press, p. 33)

The sins still in our lives are the barrier, the roof, that keeps us from getting closer to Christ.

We should all admit that we’re not so great! We have sins. But sometimes that’s hard to admit. Joseph Stalin, the Communist dictator of the Soviet Union, was responsible for many millions of deaths. Guess when he turned Communist? When he was attending an Orthodox seminary studying for the priesthood! Many years later, not too terribly long before his death, he was visiting with someone and reminiscing. He said, “I wanted to be a priest, but I was rejected. Even now, I can’t understand why!” (Stalin, Simon Montefiore, Knopf, 2009, p. 930) It can be hard to admit sin even for a mass murderer!

Don’t be like Stalin---admit your sins. Because they are the roof, the barrier, keeping you from drawing closer to the Lord. It is important to specifically identify your particular sins. For all of us, it will be a list! Perhaps too much to deal with all at once. So pick what seems to be the worst of your sins and focus on that to start with---you can deal with the others one by one later. Pick that one sin to deal with---and declare war on it!

I want to give some advice about how to fight that war and so am going to pick one sin to focus on. This may not be a problem for you at all---the sin of gossip---but it is a very common fault. Because priests hear confessions, we can fill you in on the most “popular” sins. Gossip is usually high up in the

charts! So that will be the one I'll use for an example.....

I recommend 3 main strategies for your war once you've identified what seems to be your worst sin.

**NUMBER ONE**---Go to Confession about it. Be specific in your confessing and ask for some specific guidance for the war you are starting to fight.

**NUMBER TWO**---Every day in your prayers, pray hard for God to help you quit gossiping. This will help you in two ways----it will bring God's grace and power upon you for your battle; and it will help you keep your mind focused on that battle.

**NUMBER THREE**-- Fight hard against gossip all the time. Figure out when, where, and with whom do you gossip. What leads you into it? Then be on your toes. Let's say that most of your gossiping happens to be on the phone, with a friend or two that call you and start gossiping. You get sucked in.....and it's all downhill from there.

So----the phone rings. Start instantly praying hard for God to help you resist the temptation. You answer the phone....and sure enough it's your gossiping friend. Get in control. If the person starts gossiping, change the subject to something else—the weather, sports, your job.....anything except gossip. If the person veers into gossip, just veer away into a different topic of conversation. REMEMBER----your tongue belongs to you. No one can force you to say even *one* word you don't wish to say. With God's help, and some hard silent praying going on, just don't speak any gossiping words. And the other person will eventually get the hint.....

This kind of spiritual warfare against sin is hard! Sometimes we'll slip up. But don't give up! Maybe progress will be slow, but it can be real and lead to a real victory over gossip (or whatever sin is at the top of your own list). It was real hard for the paralytic to reach his goal of getting to Jesus Christ. But he did it! And it's real hard for us to get victory over a sin, but with God's help, it can be achieved.

For the paralytic, it all began with a firm decision—"I will get to Jesus!" Your victory over your worst sin also has to start with a firm decision---"I will be free of that sin!"

A firm decision and determination are needed. Wishy-washyness won't work. Back in the Vietnam War, there were enormous disagreements about what our country should do after we had gotten deeply involved in the fighting. It was hard for many Americans to decide which side of the arguments to be on---should we escalate the war? Or should we pull out? A door to door poll was taken to see how the opinions were. The pollster asked a woman the basic question---escalation of the war or withdrawal from

Vietnam? It was obvious she was struggling about what to answer but she finally said, "I myself am 47% in favor of escalating, 47% in favor of pulling out; and 6% of me is undecided." (Tet!, Don Oberdorfer, DaCapo, 1984, p. 87)

Don't be like her---undecided. Be like the paralytic----100% decided that you will get closer to Jesus Christ no matter what. His decision was---"I will get to Jesus!" May our decision be----"I will get closer to Jesus no matter what! Whatever roof is in the way is coming down!"

Decide, pray, go to war. May God give us victory and holiness.