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## At Home in Capernaum

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strivings cease; Take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace.”

And so, the question: “Where is your faith?” In the early twenty-first century world of hectic activity, where is your faith? In our academic world of university life, where intellectual pursuits are highly valued, where is your faith? In the constant barrage of world news that seems to emphasize how badly people can treat each other, where is your faith? In the everyday world of raising children and helping aging parents, where is your faith? When the car breaks down, when the taxes are due, when the guy on the freeway cuts you off, where is your faith? God calms the storm and turns to us and says, “Where is your faith?”

Recently, I found a passage in Psalm 73 that has spoken deeply to me in the last few months:

Yet I am always with you;  
 you hold me by my right hand.  
 You guide me with your counsel,  
 and afterward you will take me into glory.  
 Whom have I in heaven but you?  
 And, having you, there is nothing else on earth that I desire.  
 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
 but God is the strength of my heart  
 and my portion forever (Ps 73.23–26).

But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
 I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;  
 I will tell of all your deeds (Ps 73.6).

I want to encourage all of us to “tell of all his deeds.” Where is your faith? Tell me of his faithfulness in your life. Where is your faith? God calls us to live our lives of faith in Christian community, where we can encourage each other. I am thankful for your stories. I am thankful for the reminders of God’s love for us and for your encouragement when my courage and faith are faltering. I am thankful that God calls us to examine, “Where is your faith?”



## At Home in Capernaum

KATIE HAYS

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I remember the moment I knew youth ministry wasn’t for me. We had taken our youth group camping in the woods of Alabama. At the end of a sweaty game of Capture the Flag, it was time for “tick check.” We got the girls in one tent and the boys in another and supervised the checking of each adolescent body for those nasty little creatures. I thought, “I went to graduate school for this?”

But on that same trip, one of the kids gave me a beautiful gift I will never forget. We had been fishing earlier in the day, and my husband had actually caught a nice-sized fish. While we assumed we would throw it back, one of our kids wouldn’t hear of it. He wanted to cook that fish. He had a knife and a stove back at the tent site and wanted permission to go get it.

He and I walked a quarter-mile or so to get his gear. I barely knew him and figured that while we walked

I'd talk to this boy who always looked sad and never said much. I knew about his mom dying and his father raising him and his siblings. I knew about their family moving to our city to be near the dad's parents for help with the kids. I knew they traveled to see his mother's parents, in a town not too far away.

So I asked him about his grandparents . . . About how he spent his time with them, what kind of people they were. He thought a long time and then said in his sprawling Alabama drawl, "Well, I guess I'd say it like this. I have one 'don't-do-that' grandma. And I have one 'have-some-more' grandma."

Right then, I said a little prayer. I was all of twenty-five years old but in that moment the rest of my life flashed in front of my eyes and I thought, "Please, God, if you ever see fit to make me a grandmother, let me be a have-some-more grandma."

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Mark chapter 2 says Jesus was "at home in Capernaum"—the only hint in scripture that he had a home base, somewhere to come home to after one of his healing, preaching, demon-casting-out tours through Galilee. But from an early point in his ministry, according to Mark, he found no relief at home. The crowds who wanted him followed him there. Imagine being in your own living room at the end of a long day at work. You settle down in the recliner or on the couch, kick off your shoes and click on the TV. Then people start ringing your doorbell. Not just one or two, but an endless stream of guests, all wanting something from you. Pretty soon you can't get out of the chair to answer the door because they're crowded all around.

Then, right there in your living room where you sit exhausted in your La-Z-Boy, sheetrock and insulation start to rain down on your head. You look up to see someone sawing through your ceiling to get to where you are. That's how badly they want to be near you! This is what happened at Jesus' house that day.

We always say they were "friends" of the man they lowered through the roof, but do we really know that? They might have been relatives who had been taking care of their loved one for a long time, and were suffering from compassion fatigue. Maybe they were just "good Samaritans," to use a term that hadn't been invented yet, who wanted to give this guy a chance. They knew Jesus' reputation for healing disease and repairing broken lives, so they climbed and hauled and dug out the thatch and mud of the roof until they could lower the man on his mat down into the crowd. The only thing we know about them is they had faith that all this effort would make a difference for the one they were carrying. "Jesus saw their faith," scripture says, and he turned his attention from the crowd to the man lying on a mat at his feet.

The man lying on the mat doesn't have a speaking role. He's completely passive throughout the story. He gets hauled around like a sack of potatoes, and he never says a word to Jesus, never says what he wants. Maybe his paralysis is more than physical. Maybe he's been immobile for so long he can't remember how to want anything.

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But Jesus, seeing the faith of the man's friends, offers him the one thing all people everywhere want more than anything else—a chance to start over; a chance to have the mistakes of the past erased so you can start with a clean slate; a chance to have all the dumb things and all the malicious things and all the selfish things you ever did expunged from the record; a chance to have all the corners of your mind and heart scrubbed clean of resentment or lust or jealousy or apathy; a chance to be brand-new. "Son," Jesus says to the man lying at his feet, "your sins are forgiven."

Mark doesn't give us time to wonder how the man and his friends reacted; whether they felt they had gotten what they came for. Because right away, a little crowd of don't-do-that grandmas in the back of the room got upset. Mark calls them "the scribes," meaning they were uppity-ups in the religious system of Jesus' time who felt they needed to keep an eye on everybody.

I picture them standing together in a cluster, whispering to each other while they evaluate every word spoken by this new teacher. When he sticks his big toe in the water of sin-forgiveness, they can't believe

their ears. Their heads start wagging like little scribe bobble-heads, back and forth, “Oh, no, he did not just say that.”

There was a system for getting forgiveness, and the system had rules and regulations. You didn’t just go around giving out forgiveness for free. Only God could give the brand-new start people wanted, and only under very specific conditions, or so they thought. As long as Jesus stuck to healing the bodies of people who came to him, it was okay. But if he thought to step across the line into the healing of souls, the powers-that-be would have to be notified. The don’t-do-that grandmas of the faith were watching.

Jesus, as you already know, is a have-some-more messiah. The text says he “perceived in his spirit” that they were wagging their heads and clucking their tongues, so he decided to go a little further. “Which is easier,” he asked them, “to forgive his sins or get him up and walking?” If I’m a scribe, I’m hoping that question is rhetorical, because I’m not sure what the answer would be. I’m pretty sure I don’t have the power to do either, so how would I know which is easier?

But while I’m wondering how to answer his question without sounding like an idiot in front of all these people, he keeps talking. “Listen, I know you can’t do either one, but I can do both, see? Let me show you.” And he turns to the man, the man who has just started his brand-new life as a wholly forgiven, sparkling clean child of God. “Fellow, this is your lucky day,” Jesus says. “We’re running a two-for-one special, so you can have some more. Get on up, and get outa’ here. Go on; go home. Have a great life.”

“And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’”

Hear the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1.18: “As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been ‘Yes and No.’ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not ‘Yes and No’; but in him it is always ‘Yes.’ For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’ For this reason it is through him we say the ‘Amen,’ to the glory of God.”

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Some of you know that I arrived here, in Georgia, in Gwinnett County, in Lawrenceville, at First Christian Church, after thirty-six years of people saying “no” to me. I was raised to believe women could prepare the communion trays but could not serve the Lord’s Supper. Women could and should proclaim the gospel from tiny little chairs in a children’s classroom but never, ever stand behind a pulpit to do the same thing. Women could support the ministry of the church with their money but must not be included in the discernment and decision-making processes of the church.

My calling to preach, to serve the church as a pastor and teacher, was a source of contention all my adult life until recently. The religious authorities in the churches of my youth shook their heads back and forth like don’t-do-that scribes. “No” was not the only word I heard from those with the power to make changes on my behalf, but it was the most common and the loudest.

But “yes” was the word I kept hearing from God. “Yes,” God would whisper to my hopes for more theological education, and then, “Have some more!” and I was on my way to Yale. “Yes,” God would whisper to my hopes for a job, any job, after graduation, and then, “Have some more!” and I stayed employed for eleven years against all the odds, preaching for and pastoring some of the finest people I’ve ever known.

But in the back of the room, always, there were bobble-headed scribes, shaking their heads “no,” grumbling that I had crossed the line every time I entered the pulpit. Gradually, their grumbling became a roar, and then an ear-splitting screech that could not be ignored, and I thought maybe the “no” had finally drowned God’s “yes.” Maybe the “no’s” had won, as they almost always do.

And then there was—you. Whether you knew you were doing it or not, you dug a hole for me in the roof of God’s house. You took up the corners of my mat and lowered me down through the crowd, right to the feet of our Savior, and set me down. I could not move; I could not speak; I could hardly breathe. But God

saw your faith, and gave me exactly what I needed: forgiveness of sins, first.

Forgiveness for the bitterness in my heart; forgiveness for the fear that ruled my decision-making; forgiveness for the belief that God, having worked a miracle or two in my life up to this point, would probably not be inclined to work another on my behalf; forgiveness for the inclination to throw in the towel out of sheer exhaustion and a selfish desire for immediate relief.

And then, the have-some-more Messiah offered me a second helping. A two-for-one special. "As long as we're at it," he said to me, "why don't we throw in some walking, as well? Why don't you get up off that mat and take a stroll? Why don't you walk right into that church and do the work I've called you to do? Go on. Get on up. Go home."

So here I am, making myself at home, right here, with all of you. You have been the "yes" of God for me. You have made God's "yes" a reality for me. I am quite sure that the have-some-more Messiah feels at home here, too.

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It seems to me that our next job together is to crowd this house with people who need to hear God's "yes." There are all kinds of people out there shaking their heads "no"—religious people, people you work for and with, people you love, people you can hardly stand but have to be around anyway. "Don't do that," they say. "You can't do that. You shouldn't even try." Their "no's" are persistent and insistent.

But God's "yes" is more so. "For in Jesus every one of God's promises is a yes." That's what scripture says; that's the have-some-more Messiah we have come to love and depend on for our daily bread and our second helpings. We've already heard it, but most people haven't. They're still thinking God is mostly about "thou shalt not's" and "don't do that's."

You are invited this morning, as we sing a hymn of invitation, to let God's "yes" be the final word in your life. Let God say "yes" to you in baptism. Let God say "yes" to you by connecting you to this family of believers as a member of this church. Let God say "yes" to you by forgiving your sins, by getting you up off the floor, by giving you the brand-new start everybody wants more than anything else in the world.



## Let's Pray the Prayer

CHARME ROBERTS

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Nothing about following Jesus is simple. The first disciples found this out first-hand. If we review a few of the events preceding their request in Luke 11, "Lord teach us to pray," we see their difficulties parallel ours, and in fact the troubles Jesus faced seem familiar as well.

In chapter 4 Satan tries to get Jesus to walk away from living as fully human. He suggests that Jesus ought to take the easy route, to give up on the discomfort of fasting and all the difficulties of living in a human body. Further, Satan suggests that Jesus force people to follow him by ruling over all the kingdoms—that he force them instead of invite them. "All these kingdoms will be yours if you bow down to me." And he tries to get Jesus to put on a dazzling display of divine power by jumping off the top of the temple—"the angels will catch you," Satan says. The idea is don't mess around with this plan of being human.

The good news for us is that Jesus did stay the course of being one of us and so he gets what it is like to be here dealing with ourselves as flesh and bone, with our desires for power and easy escape. He knows