

Faith and Friendship
Blue Christmas Service
Luke 5: 17-26
December 16, 2007

It was just after Christmas in 1986 that I decided to leave the largest and more powerful computer company in the world and go to work for the underdog. Although we at Amdahl has a great product line of mainframe computers, IBM still got most of the business from the Fortune 500 marketplace. I studied diligently to learn the highly technical specifications of my new product. Almost immediately I had my first opportunity to make a proposal to my largest customer. I lost. Then I had another opportunity. I lost again. As my head was spinning, just getting to know this the customers of this large multinational oil company, I knew I would have one more opportunity later that summer for a \$5 million mainframe to this huge company. I just knew if I worked harder on the technical analysis, on the cash flow financial analysis and in understanding their complex capacity and performance needs, I would get a decent shot. But my confidence was low. I was beginning to wonder whether I had made the right decision in coming to work for this company. My new sales manager, Tim, pulled me aside one day and shared his 20 years of sales wisdom. He said so wisely and kindly to me, “You know, Andy. You can do this. But remember, it’s not about facts and figures. It’s about faith and friendship.” I took that advice to heart cultivating customer friendships and it worked. I made my first big sale.

Our gospel story today is also about the power of shared faith and friendship, especially when we experience trials and defeat in our lives. Jesus was in a crowded house in Galilee, teaching them. In the midst of this scene, a paralyzed man, carried by his friends, is lowered through the opened roof at his feet to be healed. This seems to us

an amazing story of faith and friendship, does it not? But let me tell you how amazing it truly is. Religious folk of Israel believed that there was a direct link between suffering and disease and sin in life. In other words, if you became paralyzed and could not walk like this man, religious people taught that you must have some sin in your life to cause this suffering. There was no such thing as bad things happening to good people. Imagine not only the physical pain, but the sense of emotional and spiritual guilt. People not looking you in the eye...feeling like an outcast. You get the picture. So what does Jesus do? Instead of taking pity on the man and saying, "you are healed; walk," he says, "Your sins are forgiven!" Now no one could forgive sins but God. But Jesus lifts this man out of his spiritual and physical pain by saying "first, you are right with God. Now walk." And he does. Instantly the authorities, the ones with all the rules, regulation, facts and figures are silenced. All the ones who would condemn the man to a life of suffering are shamed by this amazing act of forgiveness and healing. And it was the shared faith of the friends that made this possible. He left, praising God, his spirit lifted, because he had true friends who lifted him with faith.

I had my first Blue Christmas in 1989. I had just returned home from a business trip on December 7th when my first wife sat down with me and told me she had filed for divorce. I was devastated. As we separated, I immediately began to isolate and condemn myself. I had sinned and caused this destruction. At that time I didn't have a strong church family to come to my aid. Most were too embarrassed for me and began to avoid me. I sat in isolation for what seemed like days. Christmas never seemed so dark as I slipped into depression for the first time in my life. I remember one of my sales buddies invited me over to his house for Christmas so I didn't have to be alone. But early in 1990

I decided I had to be around people if I was to survive spiritually. I forced myself to go to a new Sunday School class, to go to divorce recovery, and I found friends who shared their faith when I didn't have any faith of my own. Their words of forgiveness and acceptance convinced me that God loved me. And through those who didn't look at the facts and figures of my life in ruins, but only the faith of what God could make of me, God lifted me out of the pit of darkness.

I can only imagine what actually happened with that paralytic that morning. I can see him lying depressed in his bed. Suddenly his friends show up sharing the exciting news that Jesus the healer is down the street teaching. In their eyes he catches the light of lost hope. They urge him to go. He resists. Finally they carry him down the street to the crowded house. The paralytic says, "Forget it. It's too crowded. This man can't forgive me anyway. God has condemned me and this is the sign." But they persist. They say, "We believe and so can you. We'll take you in through the roof because we believe in this Jesus and we believe in you."

Friends, you are here today because there is unresolved hurt in your life. You are here today because you hunger for shared faith and a closer walk with the God of the universe. Maybe you have come because a friend invited you. Maybe you have come out of sense of sadness that doesn't quite match what you are supposed to fill at Christmastime. Know this. You are loved. God wants you to release the thorns of sadness. God wants you to know the light of hope in your life again. God offers those to you through the sign-acts of Holy Communion and shared worship. True friendship awaits here. Friendship with God and friendship with another. In a moment we will invite you to leave at Christ's table the idol of despair and light the candle of hope.