

These days you might say that we are moving too fast, and making too much noise, to perceive the gentle voice of God. With our windows rolled up, stereos cranked and engines roaring, we have little chance of hearing anything other than the car horn of the person waiting behind us at a stop light. And it is also possible for our cellphones to break through all the noise when our loved ones call us wondering where in the world we are at.

A young and successful executive was traveling down a neighborhood street one day, going a bit too fast in his new Jaguar S-Type Sedan. Who could blame him though, with his Jag boasting a 3-liter, 6-cylinder, 240-horsepower engine, with 5-speed automatic transmission? Thankfully at the very least the driver was keeping an eye out for kids darting between parked cars, and eventually he slowed down when he thought he saw something.

As his car passed, no children appeared. Instead, a brick smashed into the Jag's side door! This in turn led the man to slam on his brakes and to back up his Jag to the spot from where the brick had been thrown. Jumping out of his Sedan, the driver grabbed a kid with a buzz cut, who wearing tattered cargo pants, and pushed him up against a parked car, shouting, "What was that all about and who are you? Just what the heck are you doing?"

As the businessman's anger caused his blood to boil, he went on. "That's a new car and that brick you threw is going to cost a lot of money. Why did you do it?" "Please, calm down. I'm sorry, I didn't know what else to do," pleaded the youngster. "I threw the brick because no one else would stop." Tears were dripping down the boy's chin as he pointed around the parked car. "It's my brother," he said. "He fell out of his wheelchair when I was rolling him off the curb and I can't lift him up." Sobbing, the boy asked the driver, "Would you please help me get him back into his wheelchair? He's hurt and he's too heavy for me."

Deeply moved, the executive tried to swallow the rapidly swelling lump in his throat. He lifted the young man back into the wheelchair and took out his handkerchief and gently wiped at his scrapes and cuts, checking to see that everything was going to be okay. "Thank you," the grateful child said to him. The man then watched the little boy push his

brother down the sidewalk toward their home. It was a long walk back to his Jaguar ... a long, slow walk. He never did repair his side door. He kept the dent to remind himself not to go through life so fast that someone has to throw a brick at you to get your attention.

Now in case you didn't know, our God is constantly whispering in our souls and is always speaking to our hearts. And you might even say that sometimes when we don't have time to listen, he has to throw a brick at us to get our attention. After all, each and every day we have a choice. We can listen for God whispering to us - or wait for the brick.

Thankfully the four friends in tonight's gospel story heard the whisper of God, which is why they took the drastic actions they did. After learning that a healer named Jesus was in the town of Capernaum, they put a paralyzed friend of theirs on a mat and carried him to the house where Jesus was teaching and performing miracles. But, when they arrived, however, they found that the house was packed, and the crowd was spilling out into the street.

Since apparently there was simply no way that they could elbow their way inside, especially with the human load they were carrying, they grabbed some bricks of their own to get the attention of the others. Climbing to the top of the house, they punched a hole through the roof and lowered the paralyzed man down on his mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he proclaimed to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." He then ordered him to, "Stand up, to take his mat and go back to his home." And in response the man obediently stood up, picked up his mat and walked out through the front door, amazing everyone in the house.

In our narrative today we observe God whispering in the souls of those four friends and speaking to their hearts. In doing so he inspired them to seek out Jesus, using whatever means necessary, and to trust him to heal their paralyzed friend. Eventually, when the foursome dug through the roof, Jesus looked up at their dusty faces and saw their faith shining through. Which begs the question, would he see the same in us?

Tragically, most of us are moving too fast and making too much noise to hear the gentle voice of God. Our windows are rolled up, our heaters are blowing, our stereos are cranked, our 240-horsepower engines are roaring, and we have little chance of hearing the whisper. And unfortunately, we don't always pay attention until we get hit by a brick. And then - when we do try to get involved with others, it can still fall short because our connection with the needy and marginalized is inconsistent at best.

A professor of World Christian Studies from Seattle Pacific University named Miriam Adeney declares, "we touch the lepers at arm's length, without ever leaving the security of our own turf. But loving our neighbors means something more. It means being vulnerable. It means entering into their pain." She goes on to say, "When God in Jesus came to live among us, He shared our troubles and felt our hurts. Do we feel the pain of those in other countries?"

Perhaps we need to consider the idea that we will hear the whisper of God only when we are willing to feel the pain of our global neighbors. When we become vulnerable enough to share their troubles and feel their hurts, and then take actions that show that we love our neighbors every bit as much as we love ourselves. After all, our love does not simply consist of warm and wonderful feelings, but must be revealed in concrete actions, if it is going to reflect our Christian faith.

For, if "a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food," observes the letter of James, "and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply for their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Faith without works is dead, says James, and that's why the foursome in Capernaum had to punch through the roof to get their paralyzed friend to the healer. It was only when there was dust on their faces and dirt under their fingernails that Jesus looked up and saw their faith.

So, what are you going to do to make your faith visible? The young executive in the Jag lifted the hurt boy back into his wheelchair, took out his handkerchief and tended to his wounds. That's active faith. Another person spends a day each week reading and

singing with patients on an Alzheimer's unit. That's visible faith. A family devotes a night on a regular basis to working at a local shelter for the homeless. That's faith in action. An individual serves as a volunteer chaplain and acts as a caring presence in the life of someone who is feeling alienated from friends and from God. That's faith you can see. Still another person meets fellow believers on international mission trips and works on issues of social justice. That's faith combined with works, in a vital and world-changing way.

The key is for us to listen for the whisper of God, and then act. To get up, get moving, get lifting, get carrying, get climbing and get digging ... whenever we hear the gentle voice of God calling us to do some work on behalf of others. Sure, there may be some barriers that separate us from Jesus, and from the people around us. But like the fearless foursome of Capernaum, we can break through them.

Today's Gospel narrative is a wonderful reminder for us that when we place the needs of the world in front of Jesus, amazing things can happen. The paralyzed can be healed. The hungry can be fed. The oppressed can be freed. The poor can be helped. Peace can break out, justice can be done, and hope can replace even the most desolate forms of despair. We must try to remember, however, that it all starts with hearing the still small voice of God and taking action. Quickly, I might add, before the next brick hits us. Thanks be to God. Amen