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Imagine a ten-year project researching and recreating a synagogue in Poland from the 18th-century, a lost building that had been destroyed by the Nazis. You invite over 300 students and professionals from 16 countries to join you rebuild it using only hand tools that were available 300 years ago. The crew would have only 6 weeks to “hew, saw, and carve 200 freshly logged trees and assemble the structure.” You would face a “seemingly impossible deadline and despite torrential downpours and exhaustion, the team must create the structure, and disassemble it again for shipping and eventual installation.” To recreate the artistic mural on the ceiling, you would have to look at black and white photos and reconstruct the color palate from one color source.¹

Impossible, you suggest? Not for artists Rick and Laura Brown who led this project, documented in a film called *Raise the Roof*, for they inspired hundreds of people to join them on this project of healing the scars of history by recreated a lost Polish synagogue.

Sometimes it’s our wounds that inspire us to offer hope to one another, as was the case with one survivor of the Holocaust.

In his memoirs about surviving the World War II concentration camps, Eli Wiesel claims that he and his father motivated each other to survive. Wiesel needed to stay alive to take care of his elderly father. That became his motivation for surviving the concentration camps. He knew that if he died, his father would give up hope and die also.

Wiesel wrote, “The Germans tried to get the inmates to think only of themselves, to forget relatives and friends, to tend only to their own needs. But what happened was just the reverse. Those who retreated to a universe limited to their own bodies had less chance of getting out alive, while to live for a brother, a friend, an ideal, helped you hold out longer.”²

Inviting others to rebuild a lost synagogue or inspiring someone to live for the next day in the midst of terror are ways to raise the roof of hope, offering a view of better possibilities.

Little did they know, but four friends would have to raise the roof to help their friend who could not walk find hope. As the Gospel of Mark tells us,

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they wanted to get him to Jesus for healing, but since Jesus was getting popular, this task was not going to be easy. Although Jesus had tried to keep his healing ministry on the down-low, the word got around. One day while teaching in a house, the crowds began to gather, filling the rooms where he spoke the word. The four helpers arrived carrying their friend on a mat. I imagine them checking all the entrances to the house—you check the back door. How about the windows? There's gotta be a way inside.

And suddenly one of them suggests, "Let's raise the roof. Tear off a few pieces of the roof."

"And then what?" another helper may have replied. "Are you gonna drop him through the hole so he lands on his head?"

"We need some rope. We can lower him through the hole and place him right in front of Jesus. That will get his attention. Surely Jesus will heal him if we go to all that trouble to get him inside."

But there's a twist in the story. Jesus didn't begin with healing—he did something much more

radical, and fortunately, we have several people here today who experienced that event as we take you live on location to the small house where four friends raised the roof, and so did Jesus.

Reporter: We're on the scene now. Jesus of Nazareth has just forgiven a man's sins. Now, we don't yet have all the details, but we'll bring them to you as we know more. Wait...here comes one of the witnesses now. What can you tell me about the events that unfolded here today?

Friend: There were four of us carrying him. I mean, he was heavy, but that's what you do for a friend. When we couldn't get to Jesus because of the crowd, we dug through the roof. It was risky, but this Jesus was worth the risk. We lowered our friend down right in front of Jesus – he was paralyzed, you know, so we couldn't just walk him in anyway. Well, when Jesus saw our friend and our faith, he said, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Reporter: Astonishing! How did the scribes take it?

Scribe: How did we take it? We were outraged! We wondered, how could he say such a thing? It's blasphemy! Only God can forgive sins! Does this man think he is God? And then

he said to us, “Which is easier, to say to one who is paralyzed, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk?’”
 Outrageous!

Reporter: Wait...here comes the man now. He’s...uh...walking. Sir, what do you have to say?

Man: I was really hoping Jesus could heal me. He said simply, “Stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And I did! I mean, everyone was murmuring, and praising God. They said, like, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Reporter: We’re going to follow Jesus down to the sea, where he still seems to be stirring things up. There’s a whole crowd around him. Wait, he’s saying something...He’s talking to Levi, the...tax collector. Well, this is just getting stranger and stranger.

Levi: I can’t believe Jesus and his disciples had dinner with me! And my fellow tax collectors, and others, too. Those Pharisees keep calling us sinners. But then Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, only those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Reporter: Jesus’ words are cutting, for sure. The crowds seem pretty upset.

Person: We asked Jesus one day, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” He answered with a patchwork of confusing sayings. He said, “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.”

Man: Yeah, and he said, “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made.”

Person: And, “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

Reporter: The more Jesus heals, the more they flock to him. The more he speaks, the less they understood.³

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There you have it. The four friends raised the roof to help one man find healing, but Jesus raised the roof even more as he did the unexpected—he forgave the man’s sins, which was something the religious leaders saw as scandalous. They believed only God had the power to forgive sins, not this man Jesus. He seemed to continue to do the unexpected—eating with outcasts, healing, and offering forgiveness.

I wonder if Jesus set an example for us as well. When’s the last time you had the opportunity to forgive someone? It’s not easy, is it? When you have been deeply hurt, it’s often much easier to hang onto the anger and pain, reliving the memory of what the person did to you, feeling the resentment over and over again. To offer forgiveness brings the possibility of raising the roof toward wholeness,

opening the opportunity for you both to find hope and healing.

Sometimes it’s even difficult to offer ourselves forgiveness, for those memories of what we’ve done rumble around inside us. Raising the roof may prompt us to look within ourselves, searching for the forgiveness that God offers us.

In a world that seems focused on violence and revenge and power, raising the roof exposes the inadequacies of these ways and gives us hope for another way—a way of forgiveness and hope, something we all need every day. So, raise the roof. Look inside. Encounter Jesus. Experience forgiveness. And find healing.

¹ <https://www.polishsynagogue.com/>

² <https://www.homileticonline.com/>, February 19, 2006.

³ Adapted from Narrative Lectionary *Program 2 2019-20 Worship Resources*, p. 10.