

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

POWER TO FORGIVE, POWER TO HEAL
Matthew 9:1-8

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

St. Matthew tells us that when Jesus came home to Capernaum some people brought a paralyzed man to him hoping that Jesus would heal the man of his paralysis. Now this fellow was pretty bad off. He was confined to his bed paralyzed. He couldn't move at all. He had to depend on others to move him around and provide for him. He was clearly one who would benefit from a miraculous healing. The Scriptures teach us that we are to help those in need, and so we would expect our Lord to condescend to help this man.

But when Jesus sees the paralyzed man what does he do? Surprisingly He doesn't lay hands on the man and heal him of his paralysis. No, He says to the man: "Son be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you." Why would Jesus say this to him, when he so obviously needs to be healed of his physical paralysis? Why would Jesus ignore that problem all together and tell the fellow to be happy because his sins are forgiven? It seems to us that the man would probably be happier if he could walk again, doesn't it? But we think on a very earthly level. We usually understand only what we see and even that not too well. Our Lord, on the other hand, sees and understands all things. This is why He says what He says.

Jesus can see that the man is suffering from something far more serious than paralysis. Yes, our Lord knows that the man is disabled in a worse way. He is disabled by sin. Sinfulness is much more serious than any physical ailment. For while physical disabilities may hinder us and make life extremely difficult or painful, they eventually come to an end. But the spiritual disability of sinfulness not only hinders us from living life to its fullest, it also condemns us after death making eternity a place of miserable torment and suffering far worse than any suffering to be found on earth.

In fact, were it not for sinfulness, other physical disabilities would not exist either. When God created Adam, he knew no sickness or other defects physical, mental or spiritual. But when Adam sinned all of creation was affected. That which was called very good by God was now tragically marred. And the ruination caused by sinfulness was manifested in very physical ways: diseases, both physical and mental, disabilities, floods, earthquakes, violent storms, fierceness among the animals, wars among men, desolation of the lands and eventual death to all that has life. This is the effect that sinfulness has on the very matter of the world.

When Christ Jesus says to the paralytic "your sins are forgiven you," He's really getting at the root of the problem; not that the paralytic had committed any worse sins than anyone else, but that his disease was a side effect of sinfulness in the world in general. Jesus in healing him of his sinfulness, truly blessed the man at the most basic and important level. For when one's sins are forgiven, one has the promise of the full restoration of life in heaven.

Witnessing this scene several of the scribes grumbled within themselves, thinking that Christ had blasphemed. Only God Himself could forgive sins. Only He had the authority and the power to do so. So, they thought, when Jesus said to this man “your sins are forgiven” that He was acting without authority and making a mockery of God.

Of course, they were wrong. For Jesus, as you know, is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. And as God, He knows the thoughts of these scribes. He says to them: “Why do you think evil in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk?’”

Of course it is easier to say “your sins are forgiven you.” For any one could say it, but only God could actually make it true. So, to prove that He really could forgive sins, that He really could say it and make it happen, Jesus heals the man’s paralysis. He says to the scribes: “‘But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’ then He says to the paralytic: ‘Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’” And the man does just that, proving that Jesus has the authority not only to say something, but also to make it happen. He proves that He has the power and authority to forgive sins.

It is a good thing that He does. We, after all, have the same disease as the paralytic. It manifests itself in different ways, of course, but the root issue is still the same. We are all sinners. Just like the paralytic, we often come to Jesus with many other problems. Some come with depression, others with cancer, still others with a failing relationship, and others suffering from the current financial woes that are plaguing our economy. And indeed we should seek His help in these problems. But we must not forget the most serious problem, our sinfulness. The other problems, after all, are so obvious, but there is a deeper problem that lies underneath them, the brokenness of mankind caused by sinfulness, a sin which infects each of us and manifests itself in each of us, not only by the sinful things we do, but by the things we suffer.

Just as with the paralytic, however, Jesus sees to the root of our problems. He sees our sinfulness and knows our need for forgiveness and spiritual healing. And Jesus gives us that forgiveness. He has the power to do so and the authority to do so. What is His by Divine right, He also earned as a man, taking our sins upon Himself and by going through the miserable torments that were meant for us. By suffering and dying for us, He has earned forgiveness for us and for the whole world. And now He gives it to us without any cost on our part.

Jesus indeed has power on earth to forgive sins. But where do you find His authority and power exercised today? After all, you cannot step up to Jesus in person, or be carried to him like the paralytic in the Gospel Lesson, So where do you come into contact with His forgiveness? Where is the power and authority vested?

It’s vested in the Office of the Holy Ministry to be given for your good by your pastor. The pastor is Christ’s own ambassador to His people. When the pastor gives forgiveness in Holy Absolution, it is Christ Himself saying: “Your sins are forgiven you.” He gave His pastors the authority to speak in His place when He sent them out and said to them: “He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me.” (Luke 10:16) and: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:23)

And this you can be sure of. When the pastor says to you “I forgive you all of your sins,” they are forgiven you. You need no further proof than the words of Jesus, for He has already proven that He has the power and authority, as we saw today with the paralytic. We confess with Martin Luther in his Small Catechism: “I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.”

St. Matthew tells us that after the multitudes had seen Jesus forgive the paralytic and heal him: “they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.” And indeed, they should have glorified God, as should we. For, in the words of Isaiah, the Lord has: “blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins... [He has] redeemed you.” And He has given the power and authority to men, his pastors, to apply the forgiveness won by Christ on the cross to you personally.

Luther also wisely states in His catechism, “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” And we have therefore the promise that one day our whole being will be restored. The disease has been dealt with. The symptoms must surely, therefore, pass away. And they will, once we have entered with Christ into glory. Therefore St. Paul says: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” You will, no doubt, suffer in this life. But you have hope. And even now Christ is with you to strengthen your spirit in the midst of suffering. And He will be faithful to bring you through it and into His glory if you will but continue in penitent reception of His gifts, of His Word and of His Grace.

This too you can be certain of. For He who has authority over sin, also has authority to give full restoration of life, and the fullness of salvation. Let us, therefore, rejoice in body and soul with the prophet Isaiah: “Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; Break forth in singing you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the Lord has redeemed[us];” through Christ Jesus our Lord who heals us of our deepest and most serious disability; who forgives all our sins. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠