

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity (2021)

What is More Important, God's Forgiveness or Health?

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“And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’ But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—‘Rise, pick up your bed and go home.’” (Matthew 9:3–6, ESV)

Being disabled, whether today or in the day of Jesus, is not something anyone wants to experience. The disabled are all around us, and their disabilities come in many forms, physical, emotional, and certainly spiritual. But it is the physically disabled who we can easily recognize. Their bodies are broken, their mobility and ability to help themselves is extremely hampered. Life becomes a real struggle. But more than that, life becomes a burden. Unable to function as others, the disabled begin to lament their fate, they get angry at themselves, at their loved ones, and even at God. They believe that life has dealt them a bad hand. Those so afflicted need not just our sympathy and compassion, but they need our greatest love and care. Such are the friends of the paralytic in today's Gospel Reading.

St. Matthew tells us that when Jesus had returned to Capernaum some ***“people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed.” (Matthew 9:2, ESV)*** St. Mark tells us that these people were ***“four men.” (Mark 2:3)*** Furthermore, St. Mark and St. Luke tell us that the town people were aware that Jesus had returned home. Excited by this news, many gathered at the door of His house to listen to Him preach and teach (Mark 2:2; Luke 5:17). Those gathered included Pharisee's and teachers of the Law from every village in Judea, Galilee, and Jerusalem (Luke 5:17). This crowd blocked the entrance to the home of Jesus, making it impossible for the paralytic's friends to bring him to Jesus. But this did not deter the paralytic's friends. No, filled with love and compassion for their friend and convinced that Jesus could heal him, they climbed up onto the roof, cut a hole, and lowered their friend into the room where Jesus was. Such action is a distinct characteristic of a Christian.

This contrasts with the Jewish follower of the Law, who so often treated those afflicted with physical maladies as unclean persons, worthy only of being isolated, removed from society as quickly as possible. Moreover, they also thought their malady was a result of past sins or the sins of their parents (Matt. 9:2). But the Christian turns a tender and caring heart toward the injured and the infirm, treating their injuries and illnesses with sincere patience and compassion. Furthermore, Christians do not restrict this aid just to their immediate families or congregations, to the contrary, they offer it to the community in general. In fact, the first public hospital was founded in Rome by a Christian woman; Fabiola, around 400 A.D. and throughout the middle-ages, Christians took the lead in making provisions for the sick. Thus, the modern hospital has its origin in Christian institutions.

The commotion on the roof and then the lowering of the paralytic into the room where Jesus is was quite startling for those who witnessed this scene. But our Lord Jesus was unfazed by this unconventional introduction. Rather than being flustered, our Lord was well pleased. Seeing the

faith of those who brought the paralytic man and the faith of the man himself, He said, ***“Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” (Matthew 9:2, ESV)***

Notice, our Lord isn’t influenced by the man’s physical condition, but by his spiritual condition. Yes, he has a physical impairment, but more important is the spiritual impairment he is suffering. Oh, not that he doesn’t have faith, faith in Yahweh, faith in the fact that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and faith in the healing power of the Christ. He does! But he is weighed down by unforgiven sin. No one can see this disability but the paralytic and Jesus. Knowing his greatest need, Jesus says, ***“my son; your sins are forgiven.”***

Such is the condition of many within or community today. They are spiritually disabled. Overwhelmed by sin and its crushing consequence to their soul. Having grieved and angered God with their willful acts of disobedience, they are burdened by their sinful rejection of God. Led by their flesh they have engaged in ***“sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” (Galatians 5:19–20, ESV)*** They have slandered their neighbor, failed to forgive others, failed to be reconciled, and now the enormity of these sins, are weighing heavy upon them. Yet, either from shame or unbelief, they continue in their sin, in their disability, failing to seek the one remedy which would relieve their condition: our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Thus they fail to hear Him say, ***“my son; your sins are forgiven”*** and they remain in their pitiful condition. However, when they do truly hear Jesus say to them, ***“my son; your sins are forgiven”*** there is no more joyful event in their lives. For they hear our Lord and unlike the scribes, they believe Him.

Jesus pronounces forgiveness to the paralytic and oh my gosh, you would have thought He just uttered the most blasphemous words a person could ever speak. Indeed, this is just what the scribes thought too. They say, ***“This man is blaspheming.” (Matthew 9:3–4, ESV)*** Who can forgive sins but a priest? The sinful Jew would bring a proper sacrifice to a priest where the priest would make atonement, burning it ***“on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the LORD . . . [so the sinner would] . . . be forgiven.” (Leviticus 4:31, ESV)*** These scribes, and Pharisee’s could not recognize that our Lord Jesus was God’s final sacrifice for the forgiveness of all men’s sins. They could not see what the writer to the Hebrews saw; that ***“the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.” (Hebrews 10:1–3, ESV)***

Jesus, aware of the thoughts and whispers of the scribes, asks, ***“Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” (Matthew 9:4–6, ESV)***

These poor Pharisee’s and scribes, they suffer from a disability they do not know. Isaiah has clearly diagnosed their disability, saying, ***“Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!” (Isaiah 43:8, ESV)*** Although these rulers of the Temple have eyes, they cannot see, although they have ears, they cannot hear. They are blind and deaf to the Word of God. Addressing their spiritual disability, Jesus gives them a sign of His authority to forgive sin, He commands the man to ***“Rise, pick up [his] bed and go home.”***

Seeing is believing for most, but not all. Did these scribes and Pharisee’s change their minds about the identity and authority of Jesus? Some may have, but most did not for these were the

ones who harassed Jesus throughout His ministry. Furthermore, this is a real issue within the church today. Who can forgive sins? Can a pastor rightfully stand before the congregation and pronounce God's forgiveness in the name of His beloved Son to the congregation? Is the Absolution he pronounces truly God's Absolution? Is private confession and absolution valid? Some say yes, others say no. But those who say no, do so from a misunderstanding or denial of God's Word. God clearly commands His church, through the voice of His called servant, to pronounce and assure the people that He has forgiven their sins.

As I said earlier, disability comes in various forms, physical, emotional, and spiritual. But one need not be physically disabled or emotionally disabled to suffer from a spiritual disability. Furthermore, spiritual disabilities have far-reaching consequences, consequences that are eternal. Physical disabilities are only temporal, confined to this life. But those who die in their sins and trespasses, regardless of their physical or emotional disability, continue with a disability that has no resolution, eternal condemnation in the bowels of hell. So it is so much better to hear, "**my son; your sins are forgiven**" than "**Rise, pick up [your] bed and go home.**" For a day will come when our bed in this life won't matter, but the bed in which we sleep for eternity does.

So, can a man rightfully pronounce the forgiveness of sins? The answer, according to Holy Scripture is, yes. Not only can he, but he is commanded by Christ to do so. This is known as the Office of the Keys; the ability given to the church to forgive or retain sin.

True, it is God alone who forgives sins through His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, but Christ has given to His Church, and only to His Church, that is the redeemed people of God, the authority to forgive the sins of all who repent and to withhold His forgiveness from those who refuse to repent.

On that first resurrection evening when our Lord entered the upper room to visit His apostles, "**he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.'**" (John 20:22–23, *ESV*) Moreover, after He had given His apostles the formula for resolving sin through forgiveness and reconciliation (Matt. 18:15-17), He said, "**Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**" (Matthew 18:18, *ESV*) Here, our Lord speaks of the forgiveness or lack thereof that the Church is to apply to the repentant and the unrepentant. As a key, turn it one way and the door of heaven is opened, turn it the other, and the door of heaven is closed. Anyone who squabbles over these words simply fail to understand that our Lord desires to forgive the penitent. Moreover, He has made His Church the key bearer. That is, in these words our Lord Jesus established the Office of the Keys and gave its particular authority to the Church. The Church in turn gives oversight and use of that authority to their called and ordained pastor. Thus, we believe, teach, and confess that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

Today you don't come to the priest to offer an animal on the altar for the forgiveness of Your sins. No, today you come to the called and ordained man who has been installed as the pastor of your congregation, to receive from him what God so dearly desires to give you, His forgiveness. You come to him who stands in the stead of Him who was the final sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You come to him who by the command of He who gave His life upon the Altar of the Cross proclaims God's forgiveness upon you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You come to him who you can see and hear and of

whom you are convinced by the Word of God that he has the authority to pronounce your forgiveness.

Life is short, too short to be concerned with physical disabilities. When this life ends its eternal existence will depend on its earthly spiritual existence. Do you believe that God sent His only begotten Son into this world to die on the Altar of the Cross for the forgiveness of your sins? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is true God and true Man whose life, death, and resurrection earned your eternal salvation? Do you believe that when you hear your pastor, in the stead and by the command of Jesus Christ, proclaim God's forgiveness on you, that his forgiveness is God's forgiveness? If so, then your spiritual earthly life will continue in the bliss and blessing of life in heaven with Christ and all the saints who have gone before you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.