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Christ the King & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Cody & Powell, WY

Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

October 15, 2023

Text: Matthew 9:1–8

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I grew up in the panhandle of Texas hearing phrases like, “Talk is cheap”, “All talk, no show”, “Put your money where your mouth is”, and probably my favorite, “He’s a man of his word.” These pithy statements reflect a down-to-earth understanding – an ethic of sorts, of the importance of words combined with corresponding action. Words are important. But they must be matched with action. And vice versa. Deeds without explanation can often be misunderstood. Word and deed must go together. But at the end of the day, what mattered most in this rather rustic system of values was the importance of honest words combined with good deeds.

In the gospel text from Matthew 9, the Lord Jesus asks a question which forces us to think about the value of words and actions. Our Lord’s question comes from vs. 5, “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk?’” Two statements are placed side by side for comparison. Which of the two is easier to say? And by this our Lord means, “Which of the two is easier to say and do?” Word and action together. Which do you think is easier to say and do? Forgive sins. Or heal miraculously?

Let’s consider very briefly the context. Matthew’s description of this event is much shorter than Mark’s or Luke’s accounts. Matthew simply says, “And behold, some people brought to Jesus a paralytic, lying on a bed” (vs. 2). Mark and Luke describe a paralytic being brought to Jesus. But to do so, the paralyzed man’s friends had to tear off the thatched roof of the house where Jesus was and lower him down into the room where Jesus was. Because the crowd was so large both inside and outside the house, the man’s friends had to take drastic measures.

We need to imagine the dynamics of this scene. Jesus was inside the house teaching. And suddenly, the roof starts falling down as the men tore it apart and then began lowering something down from above. Imagine the chaos. People inside are bustling about, talking, pointing fingers. Can't you imagine the owner of the house yelling at these guys to stop tearing up his house? Finally, the paralyzed man is lowered right in front of Jesus. All eyes are on Jesus and this unexpected guest, really an intruder! And the first words Jesus says are, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (vs. 2).

It's easy to think Jesus misjudged the situation. The paralyzed man and his friends went through all that fuss so that Jesus could heal the man. It's obvious the man has a terrible physical malady. And Jesus speaks forgiveness? That's all well and good, Jesus. But doesn't the man have a greater need of physical healing? Or, at least, a more pressing, urgent need? To help clarify things, I want to put these two needs in opposition to each other. If you could only have one, healing or forgiveness, which would you choose? Which is the more important?

The scribes among the crowd heard Jesus' word of forgiveness and they understood immediately not only what He said but what those words implied. Jesus spoke words only God can speak. And by speaking in that way, Jesus was doing what only God can do. God alone can forgive sins. Jesus is speaking and acting like God. The scribes heard a man, Jesus of Nazareth, claiming to be God.

Matthew describes Jesus as doing very things only God can do. In vs. 2, Jesus saw the faith of the paralyzed man and his friends. Only God can see faith in the human heart. Take comfort in that. When your faith is struggling and it seems like it's failing, Jesus sees it for what it really is. Simply trust in Him as your Lord and Savior. And He has promised to never extinguish even the slightest flame of Christian faith (Matt. 12:20). So Jesus, God in human flesh, sees your faith. He delights in it. For His steadfast love for you never fails; He remains true. Yes, Jesus sees faith because He is God.

And then Matthew also says Jesus could read the thoughts of the scribes. Vs. 4, “But Jesus, knowing their thoughts (i.e., of the scribes), said, “Why do you think evil in your thoughts...” Again, I can’t actually read your thoughts. I can guess them. I might even guess them accurately from time to time. My wife seems to know what I am thinking even before I do. But the truth of the matter is that only God can read our thoughts. This ought to cause some pause. God really does know our thoughts. And He judges them as being either good or evil just as Jesus judges the evil thoughts of these scribes. This is why the apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians 10:5 that we Christians seek to “bring every thought to the obedience of Christ.” The author of the book of Hebrews wrote that God’s Word is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of our heart (Hebrews 4:12).

I trust in both of these divine insights – Jesus sees our faith and knows our thoughts – you can see your need for the forgiveness of sins. Our faith become weak and must always have divine support and our thoughts and intentions fall short of God’s glory. We need God’s mercy in Christ. That’s why we pray day by day, “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” That’s why we read God’s Word at home regularly. So that our faith may be strengthened and our thought be brought to the obedience of Jesus. Let me encourage you families. Husbands, wives, moms and dad. Read God’s Word together. And pray together. Do these things individually too! But pray, hear God’s Word, and sing hymns and psalms together as a family. And thereby be strengthened in faith so that love for God abounds and you can love your neighbor as yourself.

And now, that brings us to the crux of the matter. Which is easier for Jesus to say and do? Forgive sins or heal diseases and infirmities? Healing a man of paralysis is easier to see (he actually got up and went home, vs.7) and simpler to achieve. Remember, God created everything in the beginning by the power of His spoken Word. God formed man from the dust of the earth. In another situation, Jesus said God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham (Matt. 3:9). Creating and healing human beings is easy for God.

The harder thing to do is forgive sins. And, it's the hardest thing to see. You can't measure the amount of forgiveness received. Only God can actually see it. Forgiving sins is harder because forgiveness requires blood be shed by someone else on behalf of the guilty person as Hebrews 9:22 teaches. You can't shed your own blood to atone for your sins. Someone else must do that for you. Without the forgiveness of sins given through blood atonement, there is only separation from God and eternal wrath, misery, and death. In another passage, Jesus warned that it is quite possible to go to the judgment of hell physically whole and complete. Matthew 18:9, Jesus said "And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire." Through strong hyperbole, Jesus is teaching that getting rid of sin is infinitely more important than being physically whole. Forgiving sins is much harder. And our greatest need! More than health, more than food, home, clothing, security, more than anything else. That's why only God can do it. Ultimately and finally, it's a cost only God can bear. The Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God now in human flesh, bore our sins, infirmities, shame, and guilt. He took everything to His cross and shed His blood on our behalf. His divine, holy blood cleanses us from all sins.

But then Jesus does something which totally obliterates this somewhat artificial either-or distinction I set up. Either forgiveness or healing. Jesus (and really the entire Bible) puts them together. Vs. 6–7, "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." And he rose and went home." The harder thing is to forgive sins. But with the forgiveness of sins, full and complete life in body and soul is restored. (*Asa's baptism*)

Today, we come to the Lord's Supper to receive both. The forgiveness of sins and the on-going promise that our bodies will be fully and completely healed in the resurrection on the Last Day. His body and blood given to us as the pledge and promise that our bodies and souls are being made new and whole by Christ Himself. But it all starts with the forgiveness of sins leading to abundant life now by faith in the grace of the Spirit.

Jesus is a man of His Word. What He says He does. For He is the holy Son of God who not only says He forgives sins and restores life to immortality, He actually does those things. From beginning to end, we rejoice in Christ. In His words fulfilled and kept by divine actions of love and grace. To Christ alone be all glory, honor, and praise...

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.