

Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity 2024
Matt. 9:1-8 (ESV)

“And behold, some people brought to [Jesus] a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.’”

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A blessed 19th Sunday after Trinity to all of you, dear ones. Today, once again, we hear the familiar narrative of our Lord Jesus healing the poor, paralyzed man in Matthew chapter 9. And here we are, once again, confronted with a reality that still mystifies us no matter how familiar, no matter how well-acquainted with it we may be.

And you know this to be true. You’ve seen it time and again throughout the Holy Scriptures and, I’m sure, even in your own life: the Lord’s ways are not *our* ways; His thoughts are not *our* thoughts; they are mysterious, to say the least. And He so often works in ways that aren’t so easy for us to understand. It’s not so easy for us to anticipate what’s coming next.

In the things He says, in the things He does, and in the things He *doesn’t* say, in the things He *doesn’t* do, so often all of this just completely defies our expectations.

And yet, somehow, when it’s all said and done, what our Lord cultivates in us and in our midst is infinitely better than anything we could ever work out by our own. This is the very strange and beautiful nature of things in the Kingdom of God.

And in the end, the fruit brought to bear by our Lord defies our expectations in the best way. And despite everything set against Him, despite all the odds, and whatever *we* think needs to come about, the good He produces by the seed of His divine Word shall be more glorious than we could ever imagine.

In today’s Gospel lesson, our Lord is coming into His own city when, of course, some people bring a certain paralytic to Him. And right here already, dear ones—even this early on in the narrative—it’s all too easy for us to think we know perfectly well how things *ought* to go. It’s too easy for us to think we have it all figured out ahead of time.

An obvious problem is presented to the Lord, and we expect from Him an obvious solution—one that’s simple and straightforward and resolves the situation right away.

From our perspective, certain problems just come with certain expectations as to how they’ll be fixed.

After all, no one goes to the doctor because of an infection expecting to return home in a free new car. That’s just not how things go. That’s just not how we expect things to play out. And why would we?

But when the paralytic is brought before our Lord Jesus, what does He do?

Fully capable of raising the man and healing his body right then and there, our Lord says to him, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

And this all seems completely contrary to what's called for, does it not? It's not how we think things should play out. And on the surface, it looks like the fruit we're wanting to see just isn't going to be there. It's bewildering. But look what happens next!

After some scribes begin doubting the authority of Christ's Word and our Lord speaks once again, the paralytic then springs up from where he lay and returns home to begin his new life as one restored by Jesus. Can you even imagine seeing all this play out before you?

It'd be like planting a seed in the dirt in your yard and just a short time later, seeing tree come shooting up from the ground in front of you with fruit already coming forth from its branches.

Suddenly, when the paralytic is healed, we see there's a whole lot more going on beneath the surface when it comes to the words of Jesus. Suddenly, it becomes clear that when Christ first absolves the paralytic of his sins, dear ones, we see our Lord going right to the root of the issue.

As glorious as it is for the man to be able to stand and walk when he couldn't before, this is doing away with some of the temporal consequences of the fall into sin. But why should these take priority over those consequences that are eternal—like suffering God's condemnation and the fiery wrath soon to fall upon the wicked?

And why should restoring the man's broken body be most important when the paralytic's soul remains dead in trespasses and sins, when the man has no peace with the Father Who has power to destroy both body *and* soul in hell?

As I said, in forgiving the paralytic, the Lord Jesus goes right to the root of the issue. Because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation. And before Jesus shows the paralytic, and all of us, what is, in fact, the lesser mercy of healing our physical bodies, Christ first shows us the greater mercy of healing our souls through the forgiveness of sins.

By His divine Word, Christ preaches the paralytic and all of us into the kingdom of God—the kingdom which, like Christ says, is like a man who scatters seed on the ground, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how, and the earth produces first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain which ripens in the day of the harvest.

He, of course, knows what He's talking about because He's the Lord Who also planted a garden in the beginning and raised up man from the dirt. And this same Lord is pleased to sow the seed of His divine Word in the soil of our hearts. He is pleased to cause faith to sprout up in us, for us to grow and be transformed from the inside out, *spiritually* raised up and restored by Him before we're *physically* raised and restored by Him. That's what He began to work in the paralytic, and it's what He's working in us also.

And He shows us all the perfection of patience and mercy letting His work in us unfold over time, anticipating the day when this good work He's begun in us will to come to full fruition in the day of the resurrection.

Full healing in body and soul is what's coming for us in that day. And we get a glimpse of the first fruits of the resurrection in the healing of the paralytic, when Christ, by His Word, raises the man from the ground, renews him, and begins it all with the seed of His forgiveness—a Word from Him which seems unimpressive and insignificant but which, in reality, is anything but.

His Word is divinely authoritative. And it's also efficacious—His Word does what it says. And so, His Word of forgiveness takes away the guilt of our sins and gives us His righteousness instead. It removes the anguish of hell and adds the bliss of heaven. It drives away despair and produces otherworldly joy.

And it causes our heart, which was stony and barren and resistant to God, to become a lush and fruitful garden—a place fit for God Himself to dwell through the faith that His Word creates.

So powerful and wonderful is the Word of Jesus—so powerful and wonderful is His great love for us that He would do such things for us and in us, and that He would even die for us, that we in turn would die to sin and be raised to newness of life through Baptism into Him.

So, let this miracle of the paralytic being healed be a witness to you that, being raised up and living in Christ's forgiveness, you will be restored in glory.

Let this miracle be a comfort to you when you don't see the kind of progress you expect in your spiritual life, or when your physical body is broken down.

Because the Lord is far more patient than we are. He makes all things new, and He knows the fruit of what He's sown in us and among us is sure to come, even if we see nothing on the surface right now. His Word will not return to Him empty and void.

And for all of you who've seen within yourself the root of bitterness and anger spring up and anchor itself in your soul, be warned. Because as Christ says elsewhere, unless you forgive others their trespasses, your Father in heaven will not forgive yours.

So let the soil of your heart be turned and tilled by the Lord in repentance. Let the root of bitterness and anger be cut out of you. Because when Christ's Word of forgiveness takes root in you instead, and when *it* produces its blessed fruit, soon you'll desire the very same to happen even in those who've wronged you. And this will be so much sweeter than what you tasted before.

May the Lord grant that His Word of forgiveness, which He's implanted in us and all His faithful people, will become manifestly fruitful, that the transformation He brings about will soon be plain for all to see. And that what we know by faith will soon be confirmed by sight, that in the end, what He brings forth by His Word will be more glorious than we could ever imagine.

To Christ be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.