

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

“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.”

You will often hear pastors relay their experiences about what many visitors attending a divine service find most scandalizing. It’s often not the vestments, chanting, and things like these, although these are often bizarre to those who haven’t been accustomed to these sights and sounds in worship. No, the most scandalizing part of the divine service is often at the very beginning when after the people confess their sins, the pastor has the audacity to stand before them and say, “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The scandal of forgiveness is nothing new and something you see in the Gospel reading today. Listen again to what St. Matthew recorded. “And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. And behold, some people brought to him 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.” And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.”

Now, I am getting a little ahead of myself so let’s step back a second and talk about this paralytic. When Jesus speaks the words of forgiveness to this man, the Lord knows something about illness and suffering. Sin and suffering are connected. Without sin in the world there wouldn’t be any illness and suffering. And suffering and illness point you to the fact that the world has fallen into sin. The two are related.

This doesn’t mean that the man’s direct actions caused his paralysis, maybe something did, the text doesn’t say. What Jesus is showing, however, is the reality that’s sinners who get sick and only sinners who get sick. For Jesus, then, to forgive the man’s sins and heal him physically proclaims who he is and what he came to do. Jesus did come to bear our weaknesses and our infirmities even as he bore our sin. By the wounds of Jesus, we are healed.

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.”

The words of forgiveness are not empty words and there’s a cost to those words Jesus speaks to the man. The words of forgiveness are written in and covered with blood. For there to be forgiveness payment must be made. The Bible says on more than one occasion, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Jesus looks at the people before him and knows their hearts. He spoke the words of forgiveness because he is the Redeemer. Now to say “rise, pick up your bed and go home” points to his authority to do the things he says. The authority of Jesus is the authority of God himself. The scandal of forgiveness is really the scandal of Jesus. The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone and is a rock of offense to those outside of Christ. Don’t harden your hearts to your Lord as he speaks to you today. The scribes rejected Jesus and accused him of blaspheming God.

It is true that only God can forgive sins and that is precisely what he does even now in your lives. Jesus is the Lord, and he has accomplished your salvation. He has appointed the means which he forgives your sins, and he calls you to forgive one another. The forgiveness of Jesus is given to the church. It is exercised by the pastoral office and in the daily lives of Christians. Through the means of grace, the word and sacraments, God delivers forgiveness, life, and salvation. A great example of this is how God has established confession and absolution when he spoke to his disciples on Easter evening, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, 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.”

When your pastor stands before you and speaks the words of forgiveness, it is just as if Jesus is speaking those words to you like in the reading. Is your pastor Jesus? No, he’s a sinner in need of the same forgiveness. The office of the holy ministry, though, has been instituted by God to deliver Christ and his forgiveness to you. Jesus forgives you your sin. Forgiveness is a firm, sure word because it rests in the one who has shed his blood. God gives you real tangible ways you hold onto in faith his words and cling to those words as they do exactly what they say. When your pastor says, “your sin is forgiven” your sin really is forgiven for the sake of Jesus. Only God can forgive sins because the Son is the propitiation, the atonement for your sin. Take comfort and trust those words Jesus speaks to you today, “your sin is forgiven.” The ministry of reconciliation is the ministry of comfort and healing.

You trust the words of forgiveness because your Lord has promised these are his words. But it doesn’t end there. You as Christians forgive one another as well. All people who are Christians and baptized do this. In this way they praise Christ, and the words are put into their mouths, so that they can say, whenever they want and as often as it is necessary: “Be comforted, your sins have been forgiven.” This sound should not cease among Christians until the Last Day: ‘Your sins have been forgiven. Be cheerful and comforted!’ A Christian always has such words in his mouth and publicly speaks the words in which sins are forgiven. Thus, in this way a Christian has the power to forgive sins because.

Those words bring healing to relationships in families, among friends, co-workers, and you name it. Healing and forgiveness go together. Those words of “I forgive you” are powerful in your lives as a Christians and something freeing. This is just as you pray, as your Lord has taught you, in the Lord’s Prayer, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In your life you forgive one another and are comforted in this forgiveness. God gives comfort and forgiveness which are without end and measure.

The devil, however, knows this and wants the not just the opposite but wants destruction. The old evil foe wants you to be scandalized by forgiveness given to each other. He wants you to think, and appeals to your sinful flesh, that forgiveness is impossible or that it’s a sign of weakness in your life or that it must be done to a certain standard you determine. The devil wants you to think you are entitled to not forgive and to seek retribution, to hold a grudge against your neighbor, or to think you can somehow make things right by your actions. He doesn’t care how this happens or how you may try to rationalize it in your mind.

What does Jesus do, though? Jesus forgives. Forgiveness and healing go together. Jesus worked two miracles today in this Gospel reading. Jesus forgave the sins of paralytic and he healed him. This same Jesus is yours and has done this for you. Your sin is forgiven. This is the very power of God. Rejoice in this and what this means for you and into eternity. Your Lord doesn't hold your sin against you because of Jesus and the day is coming when God will say to you, "rise" not simply from a paralytic's bed but from the grave itself. That's what your Lord has done for you and how much he loves you. This is the forgiveness you have in him even now and what awaits you. This is mercy God shows to you, and it overflows to those around you as you forgive your neighbors.

This forgiveness also produces fruit in your life. The Epistle reading speaks to this when it teaches you what your new life in Christ looks like. God calls you to "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." This the healing that is a new life in Christ which has been given to you as you go through this world living in faith toward God in love toward your neighbor. God's forgiveness gives you new life. You have this, Jesus has given it to you and you are free to live.

"[Jesus] then said to the paralytic—'Rise, pick up your bed and go home.' And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men."

Listen to this account today in the Gospel reading and rejoice. Rejoice in Jesus who has accomplished your salvation. Rejoice in his forgiveness that he graciously gives to you. Rejoice in the forgiveness you give to others. Rejoice in the new life you have been given and now live. Rejoice in the healing that you have with this forgiveness and look to the final day when you will rise from your graves. Jesus has done wondrous things and still does even now, "your sin is forgiven." It really is and you belong to Jesus now and forever.

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