

A Sermon for the 19th Sunday after Trinity, September 28, 2008

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“That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins” (from the gospel, Matthew 9:1f.). The gospel comes from a section of Matthew where Jesus shows his power over various things. Jesus healed a leper, a centurion’s servant and Peter’s mother-in-law. He calmed the waves on the Sea of Galilee and cast demons out of two men who hung out at the graveyard. He forgave sins, raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead and gave sight to two blind men.

Matthew’s gospel does not say “Jesus is God” in so many words. Rather, as Jesus exhibits power over disease, nature, evil spirits, sin and death, a question pops up amongst those who observe him: “Who is this that he is able to do these things? The unspoken answer is, “He must be God.”

To have one’s sins forgiven was not a strange thing in Israel. In Leviticus chapters 4-6, God explained to Israel how people could be forgiven for various sins by offering sacrifice in the tabernacle. When King Solomon dedicated the temple, he offered a lengthy prayer in which he asked God to forgive various sins when people prayed towards the temple (1 Kings 8).

What was unique about Jesus was that he exercised authority over sin apart from the ministry of the temple. If Jesus had told the man to go to the temple and offer the sacrifice prescribed by Leviticus, the priest could have certified his forgiveness in the normal way. But Jesus just said, “Your sins are forgiven,” as though he could, by his own authority, circumvent the temple ministry.

That is why the religious leaders in the audience said, “This man is guilty of blasphemy.” Jesus was claiming to do by his spoken word, what God said could be done only through the prescribed rituals.

Jesus had evidence of his claimed authority. The man really was healed. First century Jewish people saw a connection between sickness and sin. It was generally thought that those who suffered grave illness or misfortune had done something wrong. Thus, healing assumed the power to forgive.

Now, the New Testament does not say that every sickness is a result of a specific sin. There are stories in which the sickness is a consequence of a given person’s sin—such as the man in today’s gospel and the man by the pool of Bethesda in John 5. But then there are other cases, like blind man in John 9 and St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 where sickness is not a consequence of a person’s sin.

There is a scriptural debate on this topic, with Proverbs on the one side and Job on the other. Proverbs argues for God’s retributive justice. Those who fear God and do what is right prosper. Those who don’t suffer consequences. Job offers a dissenting voice. He says that the righteous, including himself, are getting hammered out there. Both books are in the Bible because both voices reflect aspects of the truth.

What we can say is that all human affliction is the consequence of human sin in general. That is, we will all get sick and we will all die because sin brought death into the world. We all inherit that corruption of nature that makes us all mortal. This is why forgiveness is so central to gospel. Since sin leads to the death of the body, forgiveness is necessary for the hope of resurrection. We should be thankful for God’s mercy in that not every sin we commit leads to a specific affliction.

If that were the case, I know my own affliction would be more severe. Nonetheless, because of the general connection between sin and sickness, every affliction does provide opportunity to confess our specific sins and reflect on our mortality.

While we tend to lament getting older and weaker, this process is, in fact, a means of grace. Youth and health are temporary illusions They can make us forget that we are fallen creatures destined for death. Infirmity and age are encounters with the reality of the human condition. That so many refuse to age with grace shows how unwilling many are to accept reality.

The good news, the news that is better than the illusion of youth and health, is that our sins are forgiven and, consequently, we have the hope of resurrection; the hope of complete, total and eternal healing. As 2 Corinthians says, “Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (4:16-17).

The connection between forgiveness and resurrection is made clear in John’s gospel on Easter night. The risen Christ appeared to the apostles and showed them his scars as evidence that he was really raised in a real body. Then he gave the apostles the very same authority that his opponents found so scandalous. John 21 says that Jesus,

Breathed on *them*, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained (21:22-23).

Christ is risen and his resurrection life would be communicated to others by the church through the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus gave his church authority to forgive so that our forgiveness would be certain, a matter of objective fact, rather than feeling or opinion. In the sacraments of baptism, communion and confession, the church says to us, “Your sins are forgiven” in the same way that Jesus said “Your sins are forgiven” to the paralyzed man. The body of Christ continues to proclaim forgiveness in Christ’s name and power.

The story tells us that Jesus acted because he saw “their faith.” The friends of the paralyzed man believed that Jesus could heal him. We must also believe that Jesus has the power to forgive us. When we see in the Bible that Jesus speaks the word and nature, disease, evil, sin and death obey him, only the sin of pride can maintain that Jesus does not have enough power to forgive our particular sins.

Whether we have committed weighty sins that make us feel very guilty, or whether we are merely aware of our ordinary human weakness, Jesus says to each of us who comes to him with hearty repentance and true faith, “Your sins are forgiven...Rise and walk.”