

## In Nomine Iesu

### The 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity 2022

#### The Power of Forgiveness ... and of Friendship – Matthew 9:1-8

So He got into a boat, crossed over, and came to His own city. Then behold, they brought to Him a paralytic lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.” And at once some of the scribes said within themselves, “This man blasphemes!” But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” – then He said to the paralytic, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.” And he arose and departed to his house. Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord, our Savior, and our Friend, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow redeemed in Christ:

They, Matthew says, brought a sick man to Jesus. Who are they? We don’t know. But “they” were certainly friends, true neighbors to the sick man. They had to carry him to Jesus – no easy task. No doubt they brought him to Jesus because He was known for healing the sick. In the previous chapter, St. Matthew recorded examples of the power of Jesus over a variety of illnesses. Jesus had cleansed a leper, healed both a centurion’s servant and Peter’s mother-in-law, and many others who came to Him. Not only that, but He calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee and cast out the demons from two demon-possessed men. It is easy to see why the friends of the paralyzed man expected Jesus to help when they brought their friend to Jesus.

Jesus took note of the men’s faith in Him, and instead of just healing the man they brought, Jesus said to him: “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you.” In other words, Jesus addressed the source of this man’s – and all mankind’s – problem, not just the symptoms of it. He dealt with the man’s sin, not the paralysis.

#### I

How did those who witnessed these things react? Of the men who carried the man to Jesus, nothing is said of them afterwards. We can only conclude from Matthew’s silence that they went home even as they had come – in faith. They’d brought their friend to Jesus in the belief that Jesus could and would help. Their friend received nothing less than what they had believed. He received God’s own help, and not just for his paralysis. He received help for the very cause of his misfortune – help for the cause of all the misfortune that has come upon everyone in the world. The paralyzed man was forgiven of His sins. And so, his faithful friends went home filled with faith and joy, as they now walked beside him whom that had previously carried. For them there was no denying the power of forgiveness or friendship.

Another group had a different reaction, these Matthew calls “some of the scribes.” If we look at Luke’s account of this same event, we see that Luke adds more detail. The group was composed of scribes and Pharisees. The scribes were those who worked in and around the temple to copy and preserve the Old Testament Scriptures. They were highly trained professionals; and they tended to hold the views of the high priest and his supporters, most of whom were Sadducees. The scribes there that day, together with the Pharisees, who opposed many of the views of the Sadducees, began to argue

with each other about Jesus' words, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21) They debated these things as if they really knew what they were talking about, as if the word and will of God were topics like others they were accustomed to argue about, subject to human reason.

Let's hear a little more of what Luke records about this same event: Jesus asked the scribes and Pharisees, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise up and walk'?" Now hear Matthew again, quoting Jesus: "Why do think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk'?" Dear friends, reasoning about, debating about the clear and plain words of God Jesus calls evil. And evil is what it is. The word of God is given to man to be believed, not weighed in the scale of human logic. Now please understand, we are not talking about struggling honestly to understand what God is saying. We all do that. We see through a mirror darkly, the Apostle St. James famously said. We are talking about questioning whether God can or cannot, should or should not do this or that, as if we have the authority to decide whether it is appropriate for God to do something this way or that.

Now look at the **paralyzed man's** reaction. "He arose and departed to his house." We can characterize his reaction very simply. He believed. He believed and it was to him as he believed. He who had to be carried into Jesus' presence by his friends, walked away under his own power. More glorious still, he walked away forgiven, with cheer in his heart only God could implant. He went home in the peace of sins forgiven. He heard Jesus' command to rise, pick up his bed, and go home. And he did it. For him there was no denying the power of forgiveness or of friendship. He believed.

Finally let's note the reaction of **the crowd** who witnessed this event. "Now when the multitudes saw it, Matthew tells us, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men." They believed just as the formerly paralyzed man believed. They believed what they heard, and then also saw. They were truly thankful that God had given such power to men, power to heal, power to forgive. For them there was no denying the power of forgiveness or the power of friendship.

## II

It is quite common to hear church-going people today deny that God gives power to human beings to forgive sins in His name. In fact, it is common to hear it said that people cannot receive God's forgiveness until they themselves do things the way God wants. Sadly, it is not even uncommon to hear people say to a friend or neighbor, or their own children, that God won't like them or be their friend if they do this or that thing, or do not do it. Now, please, do not think I am saying that it is good to do what God has plainly told you not to do or not to do what He clearly wills. I am not saying that at all. No, we are getting at something deeper. We are getting at why Jesus said the thinking of the scribes and Pharisees was evil, which, of course, would be very unfriendly of them, both toward Him, the Savior, and toward the paralyzed man.

The Prophet Isaiah said, speaking for God, "But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham, **My friend**. You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest regions, and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and have not cast you away. Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.'" (Isaiah 41:8-10)

What people have trouble with is this. God's standards are so high, so holy, that no one can live up to them. Let me repeat. No one can live up to God's standards. That is why the Bible says that we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. That is why sin and its evil consequences, corruption and death, have power over us in this dark world, and why, on the other hand, life and light are found only in the presence of God. Our natural way of thinking is to imagine that we, somehow, can ourselves bridge the gap between dark and light, between man and God, or at least, that the first move can and even must be ours. **In this we are wrong!**

Now note carefully the language God uses toward us. He speaks of Israel as being "the descendants of Abraham, **My friend**." This is not some meaningless expression that Isaiah casually threw in there. It is not some mistake of translation. It is not even a unique statement, found nowhere else. James, the brother of Jesus, our Lord, speaks the very same way. He said, "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for 'righteousness.'*" And he was called **the friend of God**." (James 2:23) God called Abraham friend, not the other way around; Abraham didn't first call God his friend. In the same way, on the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus said to the twelve, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; **but I have called you friends**, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. **You did not choose Me**, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain." (John 15:13-16)

It is no coincidence that it is John's gospel that ends on the note of Jesus breathing on His disciples in the locked upper room on Easter evening, saying, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." (John 20:21, 23) Jesus Christ our Lord sent His apostles, His brethren, His friends out into the world to bring forgiveness to sinners. Jesus, whom the scribes and Pharisees mockingly called the "friend" of tax collectors and sinners, gave His friends authority to forgive sins, promising that whosever sins they loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:19)

How glad we should be that God so loved the world that He did indeed give us His only begotten Son, that He did send His Son into the world to, yes, forgive and save sinners. How glad we should be that God called Abraham friend, and then extended **that same friendship to us**, forgiving us as He forgave Abraham, and so accounting us righteous through faith, even as He accounted Abraham righteous.

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So, you see that the friends who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus were not only his friends. They were also friends of God. They came to Jesus as friends and went away as friends, as believers in Him God promised to send into the world to save sinners. How glad they must have been that day to walk home together with their friend, who carried his own bed home rejoicing, reconciled to God, even as they themselves were reconciled to Him. For them there was no denying the power of forgiveness **or the power of friendship**. Amen.

**Soli Deo Gloria**