

Jesus' Saving Question:

“Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’?”

Before we even get into the question which is our focus for this evening, I feel compelled to highlight this. Mark tells us that, looking at the friends who brought the paralyzed man to Him, “. . . **Jesus saw their faith . . .**” How is that possible? What could He have seen that could be described as “faith”? He saw actions, which is really all any of us can “see.” C.S. Lewis wrote: *“We may think God wants actions of a certain kind, but God wants people of a certain kind.”* I suspect this is what Jesus concluded was evidence of faith: not letting things get in the way. This is a sign that God can be trusted to step into the situation, and to forge ahead in that trust.

But now to the point, Jesus' Saving Question: Which IS easier — to say to a paralyzed man, *“Your sins are forgiven,”* or to say to him, *“Get up, pick up your mat, and walk”*?

On the empirical level, “get up and walk” is harder. Why? Because if you say that, either there is proof or there is not. Everybody in the situation knows rather quickly if your words have power — that is, effect. So it is harder to say “Get up and walk” and take that risk.

Conversely, “Your sins are forgiven” is easy to say, because who's going to challenge whether it has happened or not? Who's going to know? Maybe the person who gets the forgiveness will have a sense that something has taken place, a positive feeling to have heard the other person offer release. But beyond that, there is no “proof” that can be educed to demonstrate that something has happened.

So, if saying, *“Your sins are forgiven,”* is the easier, why is it that we often find it so hard to say, *“I forgive you,”* or to ask *“Will you forgive me?”* Pride is part of it. To seek forgiveness would mean having to admit that I've done something wrong. The grant forgiveness could mean that

I will give up something that I may otherwise use to my advantage, if not then and there, then sometime in the future.

But I think misunderstanding forgiveness is a greater problem. Many people confuse forgiveness with several things it is not. Forgiveness is not . . . excusing the behavior of the other; it is not saying that what happened didn't matter; nor is it opening ourselves to more of the same; it is not pretending like what happened didn't happen; nor it is hiding the hurt (pain, shame, wrong). Forgiveness is none of those: Forgiveness is letting go of the pain and the event, and handing them over to God.

What we think we want is justice, which we tend to define as “‘them’ getting what ‘they’ deserve.” Which really is not justice, it is revenge. Paul wrote to the Church at Rome: ***“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’”*** (12:9). He is quoting the Book of Deuteronomy. So, God gets all the fun? We want in on some of that “*give it to them.*”

But, we don't want justice to apply to us (only grace). In the words of a Randy Newman song: “*I just want you to hurt like I do, honest I do, honest I do, honest I do.*” Newman said that he wrote that song in response to the “We Are the World” video, and wanted to write another anthem that everybody could sing. And his lyrics to reflect an attitude that a lot of us hold a lot of the time.

Terry Wardle writes: “*Pain often births an anger that drives a person to strike back at the one who perpetuated the injury. While she may not actually act upon the demand for repayment, the deep feeling is often there. She may have even gone so far as to extend the words of forgiveness to the offender, yet struggle with the desire to punish someone, anyone, for the robbery that left her in such pain. For some the desire to punish turns inward, causing a reaction of self-hate and self abuse*” (Healing Care, Healing Prayer, p.50)

When I cannot accept forgiveness, I am trapped under my sins. If I have

hurt you, and I know that I have hurt you (and that's a key issue!), I can take off the load of guilt only by confessing before you that I have hurt you. So why don't I? I won't give you the satisfaction . . . or: I can't allow myself to seem vulnerable . . . or: I'm embarrassed (all excellently stupid reasons to avoid reconciliation).

The flip side of confessing is accepting forgiveness. Why is my accepting forgiveness important for my spiritual pilgrimage? It's one less place where Satan has room to stand. Rejecting forgiveness is "giving ground" — it is yielding part of me to the blandishments of the evil one. You're telling Satan, "*Come on, give me your best shot!*" He will, and where will that leave you?

On the flip side, when I cannot forgive, I suffer. I carry the burden. "*Seven years ago, she lied about me; I have never forgiven her and I never will.*" I got news for you ... "She" is not going to suffer one bit from your lack of forgiveness; she will not even be aware of it. It will make no difference in her life because she is not aware of it.

My giving forgiveness is important for my spiritual pilgrimage. It means that Satan can't get to you! You're free! I know some people who have had that kind of freeing moment — guilt they carried for years, decades, suddenly lifted off by a word from Jesus. We call it "inner healing" for a reason.

In this healing event, Mark tells us, the people were "***amazed and praised God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this.'***" It wasn't just the man walking that amazed them; they'd seen men walk before. It was the astonishing word from Jesus, which at first led them to conclude that Jesus had committed blasphemy. What is blasphemy? In this case they thought Jesus has usurped an authority that belonged solely to God. But they recognized that He did have the authority because in healing the paralyzed man, He demonstrated a power they perceived was God-given.

When was the last time you were amazed by anything in the spiritual realm? When was the last time you were truly amazed by anything?

Pleasantly surprised? Yes. Caught unawares? Surely. Dazzled by some display of legerdemain? By all means. But to be truly amazed? And to have that intensified by the realization that this was “of God”?

I find it more than interesting that the crowd is amazed and caught up in praise, but of the man healed, Mark tells us simply, “... **he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them ...**” and Mark tells us absolutely nothing of the reaction of his friends who had brought him to Jesus. Was this not worth reporting? Had they no reaction? Or was it that the now formerly paralyzed man and his friends already were so saturated in faith that this was the expected, and therefore not amazing, outcome?

Have you ever been paralyzed? In what ways? Were you unable to move, perhaps not physically? When I was in High School, I was high jumping at Northeastern University’s Field House, and I missed the pit of chopped-up foam rubber and landed flat on my back on the sandbags that surrounded the pit. At first I and everyone else thought I had the wind knocked out of me, but smelling salts didn’t work; I couldn’t move. They rushed me to the hospital, where the ER doctor assured me that I was not permanently immobilized, but had moved a disc that was bringing pressure on a nerve. I spent three days in neck traction, and was back practicing my jumping a week later.

I know what it is like to be physically paralyzed, albeit briefly. What about other forms of paralysis? Ever felt stagnant? Like you’re stuck? Right now more than three million people are stuck in Texas without electricity, and therefore without heat, water, food, contact with the outside world. Grief does this to some people; as does depression. They cannot move beyond the loss that assaulted them, left them feeling incapable of taking another step. Other kinds of physical pain can tie people up in bundles of incapacity. Guilt can leave some people isolated and afraid, unable to reach out.

Paralysis can become a congregational problem. Stuck in the “same old

same old” syndrome, Experiencing no significant growth. Concluding that the future is bleak, maybe hopeless.

What keeps us that way? What would it take for us to know and believe that the power and authority of God is in our life? What is the mat that you live on? What is your comfortable place to stay? Even though it may be a place of pain or guilt or grief or dissatisfaction, you remain there because the cost to get off that spot looks like it would be too much to pay. It has become comfortable; you know what to expect — you may not want what you know is coming, but you know its coming. To move is to risk, which is precisely why Jesus keeps looking for faith: the essence of faith is to risk everything on God.

Faith is accepting the word of Jesus. We heard these words earlier: *“Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son to die for us and for His sake, forgives us all our sins. Through His Holy Spirit He cleanses us and gives us power to proclaim the mighty deeds of God who called us out of darkness into the splendor of His light. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by His authority, I therefore declare to You the entire forgiveness of all Your sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and + of the Holy Spirit.”* There is no paralyzing power that can keep you stuck in any of sin’s entrapment — you are free *“to proclaim the mighty deeds of God.”*

So take up your mat — and go.

Amen.