

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost; October 15, 2023

+ Matthew 9:1-8 +

“Take Heart”

Jesus got into a boat, crossed over, and came to his own town. There people brought him a man who was paralyzed, lying on a stretcher. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Take heart, son! Your sins are forgiven.”

Then some of the experts in the law said among themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!”

Since Jesus knew their thoughts, he said, “Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” he then said to the paralyzed man, “Get up, take your stretcher, and go home.”

The man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

Have you ever gotten way better than you were expecting? Your expected two percent raise turned out to be five? You found out your yard sale purchase was a rare and valuable antique? Or it turned out the one little bundle of joy you were expecting was two little bundles?

There is a group that has faith in Jesus. They bring a paralyzed man on a stretcher to Jesus, because they have faith that Jesus can and will heal the man. How happy they would have been – how delighted! – just to hear Jesus say to that man, “Get up, take your stretcher and go home.”

And Jesus does give him that. But first, Jesus gives him way better than that. And here’s why: **...Jesus saw their faith...** St. Matthew leaves you wondering: How did Jesus see their faith? Did he look into their hearts, as only the Son of God could do? Did he see their faith in their action of bothering to lug a paralyzed person to Jesus, expecting a miracle? Either and both. It is faith in Jesus that receives this even better-than-expected blessing: **“Take heart, son!”** Here is one of the most beautiful things Jesus ever says. Take heart; cheer up; have courage; all three are wrapped up in the first word. And then Jesus calls him his child. Why should he take heart and cheer and courage? Why is he Jesus’ child? Because his faith receives Jesus’ greatest gift: **“Your sins are forgiven.”** This beauty is also worth a breakdown. When Jesus sees this man, he sees a child. But he sees a sinner, too. He uses a word for sin that includes everything from seemingly slight involuntary slip-ups to premeditated egregious acts. It is any and every possible wrong on the whole spectrum of sin. And they do belong to the man. They are his. He is personally responsible for them all. But they are forgiven. Forgiveness carries the picture of cancellation, of crossing out a debt on a ledger or tearing up an invoice. The debt is real, but the payment will not be demanded. This man has real sins. They are his. But he is not required to pay for them.

This is the greatest gift that faith in Jesus receives: the forgiveness of our sins. Your sins are real, too, and they belong to you. And you are personally responsible for them all, from foible to felony. Every last one was recorded on God’s ledger, and the payment required was condemnation. And your debt is canceled. It is not canceled because God is a bumbling bookkeeper who lost track of your debt, or because he tears up invoices just for the sake of it. No, it’s because Jesus made the payment for your sins. The balance is blotched out by the holy blood he shed to pay for them. Your ledger is now as perfectly clear and crisp as the perfect life Jesus lived in your place.

So take heart, children. Your sins are forgiven. Through faith in Jesus, he speaks these same words to you. And it's the biggest and best gift he could ever give you, better than anything a sinful human could have expected from God. But in Christ, forgiveness is ours.

Considering that gift of forgiveness is ours, considering we are God's sons and daughters, we do sometimes have an awfully hard time listening when Jesus says, "Take heart; have courage; cheer up, child!" If you followed ten Christians and ten non-Christians around for a day, documentary style, do you think you'd see any real difference in their level of heart? Their courage as they make their way through this world? Their overall cheer? What if we followed you around for a day? It would probably depend on the day, right? Are you hearing Jesus? Are we listening? Not always. Not very well.

Your sins are forgiven! You're on your way to be with him in heaven forever! So have some heart in this world! Face your challenges and even your crosses with courage! Cheer up! Smile once in a while! You are God's child. Your sins are forgiven. Take heart, child.

So the man has gotten even better than he was expecting. Of course, there is still the thing he was expecting, what he came for originally. He'll get that, too. But first: **Then some of the experts in the law said among themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!"** In the law (here the word means "Old Testament"), there is a whole lot of sin that needs forgiving. But the forgiveness must come directly from God. In the Psalms, David cries out to the Lord to mend his broken soul. When he confesses his sin to Nathan the prophet, Nathan says, "The Lord has taken away your sins." The people took their sins to the priests, who then took them to the Lord for forgiveness. It always comes from the Lord himself.

But now, here is a flesh and blood human directly forgiving the sins of the paralyzed man. Do you see why, to the unbelieving mind, this must be blasphemy? Blasphemy is claiming to be God when you're not. Only God forgives sin, so anyone human who does it must be blaspheming.

Except that Jesus is not just a human. He is a human; Jesus calls himself "Son of Man." But Jesus is also God. Not only is he God, he is the Person of the Trinity who humbled himself to earn our forgiveness. He is the Son of God who came to live the perfect life and to suffer as the sacrifice that wipes all our sins out.

Just as Jesus could see faith in both hearts and actions, he can also see unbelief on the inside and the outside. He hears unbelief come out of their mouths. He also sees it inside them. **Since Jesus knew their thoughts, he said, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts?"** Indeed, it is evil to disbelieve that Jesus is God who forgives sins. And Jesus will now prove that they are wrong about who he is, and his power to forgive sins. He will prove that he is God. **"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," he then said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your stretcher, and go home." The man got up and went home.**

So, the paralyzed-no-longer man gets everything. First, even better than he was looking for: the forgiveness of sins. And then, healing for his body.

Can I ask you a personal question? How are you feeling today physically? Any aches or pains? Anything more serious than that? How about your head? Are you clear-minded and alert, or foggy and tired? Take heart, child. Your sins are forgiven. And because they are, Jesus is going to heal all that for you, too. Your body and brain were never perfect; you were imperfect spiritually and physically from the moment you

came to life. But they will be perfect. On the Last Day, Jesus will say to you, “Get up and go home.” And you will go home to heaven healed completely and perfectly – sins forgiven; body glorified.

What more could Jesus give us? There is more. Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. And so do you and I, because God says so. And I’m not just talking about on the personal level. For example if you punch me in the face, I can of course forgive you person to person. But we can also forgive each other on God’s behalf, just as the Son of God does in this story.

Already in this account, St. Matthew is teaching it. Listen closely: **When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe and glorified God, who had given such authority to men.** Why would Matthew say “men” have the authority to forgive sins like Jesus? Because Matthew was there on Easter night when Jesus gave this same authority to his disciples. And he doesn’t just give it to them. In his first letter, St. Peter calls all believers “a royal priesthood,” and throughout the epistles we find Christians encouraged to forgive sins in the Lord’s name. Every Christian has the authority to say to any repentant person: “Take heart, child. Your sins are forgiven.”

It can be done by someone in a chancel wearing a robe. In the absolution, I say both things: “God forgives all your sins. I forgive all your sins.” And as the Lutheran Catechisms say, when I forgive your sins it is as sure and certain as God himself speaking. It can be done by someone in a white robe. But it doesn’t have to be. You also hold the keys to the kingdom, and have the power to unlock it to any believer by forgiving their sins. That means you can tell your spouses to take heart. You can tell your children to take heart. And you can give them the reason: the forgiveness of sins.

A pastor-friend told me about his young son who attended a public school. In kindergarten the teacher went around the room and asked each child to share a special ability or talent. One kid explained and demonstrated that he could turn his eyelids inside out. Another said could already swim the length of an Olympic swimming pool. The pastor’s son said, “I can forgive sins.”

It’s not a talent really, but it’s a privilege. I don’t believe many Christians understand this privilege, and believe even fewer use this privilege. And that is a bad waste of resources. Maybe we don’t feel worthy. There’s some truth in that: we are sinners. But if God makes you worthy in his Son to do this, then you are. Maybe we think our guilty Christian friend or family member doesn’t really need to hear it, or won’t care. Maybe we think it sounds cheesy to say, “I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” to someone we love. This is all wrong, so wrong.

Think what amazing love Jesus packed into so few words when he first met that man. It was very purposeful to break each little sentence down and unwrap every little word. All the power of Jesus’ words is your hands, too: to say to a believer who longs for forgiveness, “Take heart, child. Your sins are forgiven.”

How much stronger Christians would we be if we said it more? How much more heart, courage, cheer, could be seen in our lives? How much more confident would we be that Jesus will do everything for us that he did for that healed man – that one day he will say to us, when are fully healed in body and soul “Get up and go home”? There’s one way to find out. I’m not going to put pressure on you and have you practice it by turning to the person next to you and saying it this minute. But please listen when I say to you, and say it to each other.

God has given this authority to his people. Use it freely. Say what Jesus says to the believing children of God: **“Take heart, child. Your sins are forgiven.”** Amen.