

SERMON

Openness and Particularity

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Matthew 9:1–8 · 1980

Öppenhet och egenart

Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2 October 1980

Text: Matthew 9:1–8

Immanuel Church, Stockholm (student service)

There is a way of telling that shows an eyewitness is speaking, one “who was there.” Tonight’s text is such a telling. Jesus is in a reckoning with his adversaries, the scribes — but in the middle of a sentence he turns from them and speaks to the lame man, raises the lame man with creating, strong words: Stand up! Take your bed! Go! And he does not return to the quarrel with the scribes. He simply leaves them. They may stand there, with their criticism.

Strangely enough, the criticism this time was not of the healing in and for itself. It was a weekday now — and then he might take bodies in hand. When they quarreled with him because he healed, it was as a rule the Sabbath. Then one ought to be passive. No, this time the scribes’ criticism was of the gospel itself, this: that Jesus forgave sin, “here on earth.” That point becomes clearer in Mark’s and Luke’s shaping of the story of the lame man. Jesus sees a lame man and begins to speak of something wholly other than the lameness: “Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven you.”

This was a time without any organized medical profession in our style, but with an organized terror of piety. Many sick lay in fact paralyzed because they knew they had committed unforgivable sin. They only lay and waited for God’s punishment, which was to come inside their body, and they interpreted all weakness so: that they ought to be weak, sick, and frail. Their uselessness was a confirmation of God’s holiness. Now Jesus comes and — so it seems — simply sweeps God’s holiness aside: “What you have done is forgiven. You have no punishment to wait for. Rise up! Go! You are free.”

Then the learned criticism is heard: “This man blasphemes. Who can forgive sins except God alone?”

There are two offenses in the text. One is a bodily “wonder,” as we say. The other is a taking away of guilt, forgiveness. And in that time there was more uproar about the forgiveness than about the healing. For the law was God’s vicar on earth, and the rule of the law must not be softened by some sovereign forgiveness from a sovereign Son of Man, who comes with a sovereign gospel and thereby throws the whole world-order out of joint.

Who gets angry at the gospel today? No one. Both Thorbjörn Fälldin and Olof Palme think the gospel seems rather nice, in some way. That is not what they quarrel with each other about. We may gladly keep on in the churches. It is even a little admirable that we want to continue, with as little success as we have. Those who govern us in Sweden would surely also think it would be very good, really, if the church bodies could heal the sick, really heal them. Good from two points of view. Healthy and able people would then be set into production — and an efficient production is needed in Sweden. And an improvement of the state of health in the country would mean that one could reduce the public sector. Health care requires sums in the billions, which we would need at other points in the economy of society, above all to set right the balance with foreign countries.

To keep the economic apparatus afloat is our religion, and the human being is fitted into our religion. That means we regard the human being as a part of society’s apparatus of production. He is “labor power,” “consumer,” “taxpayer.” As “labor power” he increases the store. As “consumer” he decreases it — but at the same time keeps “business” going. As “taxpayer” he supplies what is needed for the apparatus to go. Beside this the human being is nothing, no more than what “electricity” and other “resources” are. “Our foremost asset is people,” we can say. But “asset” is an asset for something that “goes,” “spins” — does not stop.

If one has this religion — and we have it — then one cannot discover God, not the God of whom the Bible speaks. The apparatus, which “goes,” is namely our God, our real God — and one cannot have two gods. The definition of God is: “the one from whom one can expect all good.” And we expect all good from this spinning apparatus, “growth,” “growth...”

Or one can define God thus: “My God is the one whose judgment I fear. He is the one whose sentence of rejection crushes me.” There is the apparatus now. People are working in there. Their wages rise. They buy more. But I — I get no higher than 2.5, perhaps 3, in average

marks at school. I am no good. I get no job. The apparatus, “God,” says coldly to me: “You are unusable.” And then life is over. It does not help that I get social welfare. I am judged, rejected. I have only narcotics and alcohol and suicide, cast out by Sweden’s “God,” the apparatus.

Yes, that is our God. That god is not in the text. One is filled with laughter if one tries to stuff our valuation of the human being into the text about the lame man: take away the forgiveness, take away that “the people praised God” when the man rose and could walk, and put in sentences about the percentage of days of absence from the workplaces in Galilee, the worries in the municipality of Capernaum on account of “the declining tax base,” and so on. It will not go in. It will not fit into the text. And because this Swedish God, the apparatus, is gone, there is room for another God, the real God, he who has created every human being as a unique creature, absolutely unique and needed at his point in creation — a creature whose worth cannot be recalculated as “labor power,” or as a percentage of anything, whatever it may be.

This lame man, he has a place where eyes are waiting for him, a place he goes to when he, praising God, bears his bed. When Jesus heals him, it is not a production apparatus that gets a filling of human “labor power.” It is a unique human being who with his joy bestows life on a place where joy has long been lacking — and this is reason enough to heal. “Take your bed and — go — home!” Home — home, to the ordinary. This is the meaning of the healing and the meaning of salvation: to become a human being, to become what I am created to be.

The most central thing in the gospel, Jesus and his dealing with us, makes us open for human life. The “particularity” in the Christian faith flowers out into “openness.” The particularity in “the Christian” does not lock us into a boundary against what is human. And this — this unity of “particularity and openness” — is marked most clearly of all in the New Testament’s speech about faith.

We have made “faith” into something that separates us from others. In the gospels — and above all in Jesus’ own way of speaking about faith in people — it is altogether the opposite.

In two places Jesus praises “a great faith.” First the human text about the Syrophoenician, or Canaanite, woman — a heathen, that is — who stubbornly prays for her daughter’s health and does not let go, not even when she is called “a dog”: “O woman, your faith is great. Let it be done for you as you will.” Faith, Jesus says. The woman had not affirmed a single biblical sentence. And still more remarkable is the Roman “centurion,” the officer. He also prays for another, for his sick servant. He uses his officer’s life as a parallel: if I command “Come!” or

“Go!”, my personnel obey. And Jesus is astonished. At what? At this heathen’s faith. “Truly, in Israel I have not found so great a faith in anyone.”

Both these “believing” people are, in fellowship on the plane of the everyday, bound together with others. They do not believe in order to win salvation for themselves, in separation from these others. The opposite: it is the other’s rescue that matters.

But the crown of the work is still our preaching text tonight, the text about the lame man. Mark and Luke add a detail which is not here in Matthew. The lame man’s four comrades, who bear him on a stretcher, take the way through the roof. They lift off the tiling and lower the sick man, right in front of Jesus. We know how it sounds when four workingmen are to manage a job like that. “All right, now we are through here. Lower a little more at the foot end. There. Now it will go.” Still no one has spoken to Jesus, not the sick man, not his four comrades. But Jesus sees what they do. “When he saw their faith, he said to the lame man: Take heart..” Their faith, which bore, was his faith, who was borne.

We live, all of us — all, no one excepted — we live in a condition in which the human is damaged. Each of us can look back on things that struck us, on misfortunes that became too heavy for us. But no one who honestly surveys his life, not one, can with truth say that he has no part in, or no guilt for, such misfortunes as strike others. To every single one a word about forgiveness needs to be said. And he who stands in the middle of history, he says that word. Before we have even begun to speak, he says it: “Take heart! The guilt is lifted off. Rise up!”

If we had the strength to free ourselves from this apparatus that spins, spins and demands, then we should see what it is to be a human being, and see that we are damaged, at the root. And he who stands there, whole, in the middle of our sick world, he would grow before our inward eye. The most improbable thing in the whole gospel is that he is risen and lives, lives with power to heal.

O Lord Christ, how inexhaustibly rich

your sacrifice still stands, after centuries.

We of its truth grasp only a corner.

The fullness of your being is yet unspoken.

(Swedish Hymnal 252:3)

Amen.

Let us pray.

O God, we thank you for Jesus Christ, and that he has gone through it all, the betrayal and the sorrow and the pain and the death. When we come to our uttermost point, he is already there, before us, with his victory. Give us faith, endurance, and faith. To you be glory forever.

Amen.

Translator's notes. "Egenart" is particularity, the word of his book Öppenhet och egenart, not "identity." The lame man, the centurion, and Christ stay he. The Canaanite woman stays she, because the text is about her. "Arbetskraft" is labor power, the economic term he is refusing. The hymn stanza is for sense, not meter. Fälldin and Palme are left as the two he named in October 1980.

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·