

SERMON

Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 9:1–8

10 October 1943,

In Motala Church.

Text: Matt. 9:1–8.

Hymns: 33:4–5, 247:1–4, 314:1–6, 201:1, 490:7.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray.

O Lord, give us thy Spirit, the Spirit who enlightens our understanding, that we may rightly understand what thy holy will is. Amen. (Swedish Hymnal 247:3)

Our gospel for today is the well-known story of the paralytic who was brought to Jesus, and who received both the forgiveness of sins and the health of the body. The text is so well known that we easily pass over it without really hearing what is said. And yet it is a text that sets before us the very center of the Christian faith: the forgiveness of sins.

(1917 year's Bible translation.)

And he entered into a boat, and passed over, and came into his own city. And they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee." And certain of the scribes said within themselves, "This man blasphemeth." And Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins"—then saith he to the sick of the palsy—"Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house." And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.

When Jesus sees their faith, he says to the paralytic: “Be of good cheer, my son; thy sins are forgiven thee.” The scribes who sit there think within themselves: “This man blasphemes.” Jesus knows their thoughts and asks: “Which is easier, to say, Thy sins are forgiven thee, or to say, Arise and walk?” And then he says to the paralytic: “Arise, take up thy bed, and go home.” And the man arises and goes home. The people are afraid and glorify God, who has given men such power.

The remarkable thing in this text is that Jesus begins with the forgiveness of sins. The friends have brought a sick man. They want him to be made whole. And Jesus speaks of the forgiveness of sins. That is what comes first. The sickness is not the deepest thing. The deepest thing is the guilt, the sin, the separation from God. And it is that which Jesus first takes away.

We are so used to thinking that the important thing is that a man becomes well, that he can work, that he can manage. And that is not unimportant. But Jesus sets the forgiveness of sins before the healing. He does not say first: “Arise and walk.” He says first: “Thy sins are forgiven thee.” The body is not forgotten. It too is raised up. But the word that opens the whole is the word of forgiveness.

The scribes take offense. They think: only God can forgive sins. And they are right in that. Only God can forgive sins. But they do not see that God is present in this man who speaks. They see a man, and they hear a word that only God can say, and they call it blasphemy. They do not see that the power to forgive sins has been given to men—that is the last word of the text: “they glorified God, who had given men such power.”

That is the strange thing. The power is given to men. It is not kept back in heaven, far away. It is laid in a man’s mouth, so that a man can say to another man: thy sins are forgiven thee. And that word is not an empty word. It does what it says. The paralytic rises. The word is a deed.

We stand here before that which is the office of the church. Not an office that man has taken to himself, but an office that is given. Christ has given his congregation this word, and in that word he himself is present. When the forgiveness is proclaimed, it is not a man speaking about God. It is God who speaks through a man. Therefore the word can bear. Therefore he who hears it can rise.

The paralytic in the text could not come forward himself. He was carried by others. Their faith carried him forward to Jesus. So it is also in the congregation. We carry one another. We pray for one another. We bring one another to the word that forgives. No one comes forward by his own strength. He who lies comes forward because someone carries.

And when the word has been said, then the man rises. Not because he has become stronger in himself, but because the word has done what it says. The sin is forgiven. The separation is taken away. The way home is open. “Arise, take up thy bed, and go home.” Home—that is not only the house. It is the life, the weekday, the place where the man belongs, under God’s forgiveness.

But at last we have

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our text just such a picture of what happens when a man comes under God’s word. He lies. He cannot rise. Others carry him. And then the word is said, and he rises and goes home. It is not a picture of what the man is to achieve. It is a picture of what the word does.

Therefore it is also so, that we are not to begin at the other end. We are not first to ask what we are to do, and then hope that God will forgive. Jesus begins at the other end. He forgives first. Then he says: arise. The forgiveness is not the reward for the rising. The rising is the fruit of the forgiveness. Such is the order in the gospel, and that order we may not turn about.

When the scribes think that this is blasphemy, they think rightly about God’s holiness and wrongly about God’s presence. God is holy, and sin cannot be forgiven by a man who is only a man. But God has come near. He has laid his power in men’s mouths. That is what frightens the people: “they were afraid.” It is not a cheap word. It is a word with power, and the power is God’s.

Therefore we are not to make the forgiveness small. We are not to say: it is only words. It is not only words. It is the word that raises the paralytic. And that word is still spoken. It is spoken in the congregation, over him who confesses his sin, in the Supper, in the preaching. Christ has not taken back the power he gave.

He who hears this word may go home. He may go back to what is his, not with the bed as a proof that he still lies, but with the bed carried, as a sign that he has been raised. So may we also go home from church. Not empty-handed. Not with an exhortation to try a little better.

But with the word that has already said: thy sins are forgiven thee. That word may be carried home. It is the bed. It is the sign.

And the people glorified God. Not the man. Not the friends. God, who had given men such power. So also is our song of praise directed. We do not praise ourselves for having come. We praise God, who has given the word, and who through the word gives life.

There is a temptation to stop at the outward wonder. The man walked. That can be seen. The forgiveness cannot be seen. But Jesus sets the unseen first, and the seen as a sign. So it is also for us. We do not see the forgiveness. We hear it. And the word that is heard is enough. It does not need a sign in order to be true. The sign was given then, that they might know that the Son of man has power on earth to forgive sins. That power stands, even when the sign is not repeated.

Therefore we can leave the church with that word. The paralytic went home. We go home. The difference is not that we are stronger than he was. The difference is that the word has been said also to us. “Be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee.” That is the gospel in this text. All the rest—the bed, the walking, the people’s fear—is there so that we may understand that this word has power.

But that word is not a word that we have in our hand, so that we can use it as we will. It is Christ’s word. It is spoken where he has said that it shall be spoken: in the congregation, by the office he has instituted, to him who hears. We cannot take it and make it into a general truth that everything is forgiven in general. It was said to a particular man, the paralytic, and it is said to particular men, those whom the word strikes.

Therefore it is also so, that we are not to speak of forgiveness as if it were a mood. It is a word. It comes from outside. It comes from him who has the power. And he who has the power is not we. We have received the word. We do not have the power in ourselves.

When Jesus asks which is easier, to say the word of forgiveness or to say arise, he shows that both words are his, and that the unseen word is the harder, the word that only God can say. The seen is the sign. We often turn this about. We think that the seen is the hard thing, and that words are easy. Jesus says the opposite. To say “thy sins are forgiven thee” is not easy. It is the word that requires God’s presence. And that word he has said.

So he who lies may hear it. He does not first need to rise in order to hear it. He hears it where he lies. Others have carried him. The faith that Jesus sees is their faith, the faith of those who carry. So also the faith of the congregation carries him who cannot come himself. And the word is said to him, not to those who carried, though their faith brought him forward. The word strikes him who lies.

That is a comfort. He who has no strength, he who cannot come forward himself, is not for that reason outside. He is carried. And the word is said to him.

But it is not so either that the carrying is what saves. It is the word that saves. The friends could carry him to the house. They could not forgive his sins. Only he who spoke could do that. So it is also with all our care for one another. It can carry a man forward. It cannot save. The salvation is in the word, and the word is Christ's.

Therefore we are both to carry and to hear. Carry him who lies. Hear the word that raises. Not the one without the other. But the order is given: first the word of forgiveness, then the rising, then the going home.

The people were afraid and glorified God. The fear belongs with it. It is not a harmless gospel. It is God's power, given to men. He who hears it and passes by has heard a power, not a proposal. And he who receives it may go home with that power spoken over him.

"Arise, take up thy bed, and go home." So the meeting with Jesus ends in this text. Not with the man remaining at his feet. He goes home. The gospel does not shut him in. It sends him home, forgiven, borne by the word that has raised up his body also.

So it is also today. The word is spoken. The power is the same. He who hears it may go home. Not because he has understood everything. Not because he has become another man in his own eyes. But because it has been said to him: thy sins are forgiven thee. That word stands when he goes out through the church door, and it stands when he lies down in the evening. It is not our word. It is his.

Amen.

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