

## TWENTIETH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

### Matthew 9:1-8

*“What were the most important words I ever spoke to you?”*

You die. You pick how. Heart attack, stroke, fire, gunfight, car accident, snakebite, sat on by an elephant—you pick, it doesn't matter. You die. You stand before Christ in heaven. He asks you one question. “What were the most important words I ever spoke to you?”

But when did He speak to me, you may wonder. But He has spoken to you. He's spoken exactly where He's promised to speak: Baptism, Word, Supper. What was it He said? Recall some of those passages you memorized as a child, some of the sermons you heard, or at least sat through. And what were the most important words? They weren't necessarily the loudest, or even those who wanted to hear the most, but He spoke them. You die. You stand before Jesus. “What were the most important words I ever spoke to you?” What do you say?

*“And behold, some people brought to Jesus a paralytic, lying on a bed.”* Imagine being the paralytic, a cripple, we don't know for how long, but we do know to what extent: he is paralyzed. He can't move. He's completely helpless, totally dependent on his friends.

And don't forget what people thought about crippling diseases at the time. In St. John's Gospel, *“As Jesus passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”* This man not only spent his days trapped in a ragged mat, but, in all likelihood, wondering what he had done that God had put him there, why God was so angry with him. Perhaps this man was in the mat because he'd sinned, as, for instance, the drunk driver who crashes or the bank robber who gets shot by the police, but maybe he wasn't, maybe he was like the cancer patient who's done nothing to put herself at risk, the young man with a brain tumor for no other reason than that he does. We're not told why this man was crippled, but there is a good chance that many of those who saw him and perhaps he himself thought it was because of his sin.

And maybe you've been there. Maybe you've been faced with something and wondered why in the world it happened to you, what you'd done wrong, why was God angry with you. Maybe you've reviewed your life, reexamined every possible sin, tossed and turned and kicked yourself for whatever you thought at the moment might be the reason for your suffering. Maybe you've been in the mat.

Imagine being that paralytic. Jesus is in town, and crowds are swarming. He preaches, He teaches, He casts out demons, He even sometimes heals, and so you convince your friends to be your taxi. “Get me to Jesus,” you beg, and they do; they go so far, the other Gospels tell us, as to lift you up onto the roof and lower you down, a sort of reverse Ascension. Sinless Saviors go up. Sinners in need of saving go down.

What will Jesus say? Remember, you've spent the last God knows how long pondering your every transgression, wondering why God is angry with you, wondering why this has happened to you, and now you're at the feet of the Son of God. What will Jesus say? Surely the man was nervous, even as he was excited. Surely he was scared even as he placed his hope in Christ. What will Jesus say?

You've had those moments. You know the feeling. You've walked back through these doors again and again with the very sins you've promised to leave behind, just as filthy as you were the week before, wondering in the back of your mind if last time was the last time, if this was the

straw that broke the Savior's back, if this last sin was the one too many. You've been there, and if you haven't, you should try it sometime, because if your sin doesn't scare you, you don't yet understand sin.

Jesus sees their faith, the faith of the man and his friends, and not just any faith, but faith in Christ, for there is no other faith. We don't believe in a healing. We believe on Christ, and, if He heals us, so be it, and, if He doesn't, so be it, but, either way, He is Christ, and that is what we need Him to be.

*"Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."* Doesn't it give you goosebumps? Let me try again: *"Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."* Anything? One more time: *"Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."* Can you believe it? Jesus says that to you.

*"Take heart, my son."* Be of good cheer. Be happy. You're crippled, big deal! I've got good news. You're better off than those unrepentant studletes swaggering around town. You're a forgiven cripple. You're the man. You're my son. *"Take heart."* He couldn't speak more lovingly.

Luther puts it this way:

Tenderly [Jesus] addresses him, My son, you are ill; the devil has afflicted you with crippling palsy, and God has permitted it to happen to you, a sinful human being; as a result your conscience is troubled and you think, God is angry with me; what can I do? But, my son, don't let such thoughts sink deeply in your heart...Don't look at your illness, but listen to me when I say, Your sins are forgiven you. Therefore, say rather, Palsy, so what! My sins are forgiven, and I'll not let palsy or any other illness divert me from this faith.

And the scribes get angry. Who's this man to forgive sins? Blasphemy! They do not have faith, not because they too wouldn't like a healing or more daily bread, but because they don't know Christ, don't realize that He's precisely what they say He isn't: God. Only God can forgive sins, and that is Jesus' point, and, to prove it, He reads their minds, something else only God can do, no matter how often we've tried to do the same with others, and then He performs a lesser miracle, speaks less amazing words: *"Rise, pick up your mat and go home."* And the man did. He got up, took his mat, and went home, because when Jesus speaks, His words pack power. *"Your sins are forgiven,"* He says, and they are. You are my son, my daughter, He says, and you are.

It's time to throw you into the bed. You're the paralytic. You couldn't move. You couldn't get to Jesus. You had to be carried, paralyzed in your trespasses and sins. Do you remember it? Maybe you don't, but it happened, at least for many of you. Someone carried you to the front of the church, to Jesus, who that day was acting through a man called to serve in His place, and Jesus said the same to you, *"Take heart, my son, my daughter; your sins are forgiven."*

Water was poured upon your heads, water made sweet with grace by the wood of the cross joined with it by the Word. You were forgiven, you were alive, you were made whole. And every week you and your mat come back to relive that day, to receive that forgiveness again, to be made whole in the love of your Brother and Father, your God, Jesus Christ your Savior. *"Take heart, my son, my daughter; your sins are forgiven."* And those are the most important words He has ever spoken to you.

So take your mat and go home today. Go home, not as one dead in sin, paralyzed with guilt and fear, but as one set free, one adopted by the Most High, one who is part of the very family of God. You are His son, His daughter. You are forgiven.

"What were the most important words I ever spoke to you?" That's an easy one, you tell Him. *"Your sins are forgiven,"* and they are. Live forgiven. And when you find each other paralyzed

again, or encounter one who has never yet been healed of their transgressions, you know where to bring them, and you know where to tell them to bring you. *"Your sins are forgiven,"* Jesus says. And I'll say it again, for *"God has given such authority to men,"* that is, to Christians. *"Your sins are forgiven."* Rejoice, for the love of God, rejoice, for God has so loved you. *"Your sins are forgiven."* You can't buy those words, you can't earn them, you can only receive them through faith. *"Your sins are forgiven."* Amen.