

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Mark 2:1-12

Your sins are forgiven.

In college, I had a surgery done for which I was given a spinal tap for the pain and some wonderful medicine to make me forget what was happening. Afterward, I woke up and had one of the strangest experiences of my life. I felt my hand on something strange. I wondered what it was and, only after a few moments, realized it was my leg. My legs were numb. Having the maturity and sense of humor of a college male, I smacked my legs hard a few times, laughing because it didn't hurt. If my friends had been there, I am sure I would have let them punch my legs too. Later, however, I realized that the fact that I didn't feel what happened didn't mean it wouldn't hurt. What was funny at first because I was numb to it was painfully obvious later.

The man carried by his friends to Jesus' house today was numb. You could have stuck a knife in his feet and he wouldn't have known the difference. He was in a hopeless situation, and, even today, a cure would be unlikely. He was numb. Fortunately for him, he had good friends who did the best thing a friend can do: they brought him to Jesus. But they weren't only exceptional friends; they had exceptional faith, faith that set them to tearing a hole in some poor guy's roof. If anybody ever owed his buddies a beer, it was this guy—and not just any beer, but a nice German import.

Imagine the scene in the house with everyone crowding Jesus, jockeying for position, and demanding their turn. Then all of sudden a paralytic descends from the heavens, or at least it seemed that way. Perhaps someone shouted, "Hey, no cuts." While we don't get the crowd's reaction, Jesus gives us His. Seeing their faith, He told the paralytic, "*My son, your sins are forgiven.*"

Put yourself in the paralytic's mat, catching bouncing glimpses of everything as he was carried along, seeing flashes of all kinds of different faces, many of them desperate faces, perhaps many of them faces of children much too young to know sickness like that which had befallen them. His ears would have caught the shouts of joy of the healed and shouts of pain of those still suffering. The crowd must have smelled like a frat house mixed with a gym and a bathroom. The sun beat down on his face as they climbed the roof. All the while, he cooked in the sun like a burger in the heat tray at McDonalds. Then he was lowered into the room, which was a jumble of comfort and confusion, insanity and asylum. And then, before he could even really study the face of this Jesus everyone surged toward like a soccer crowd, Jesus spoke to him, "*My son, your sins are forgiven.*"

It was often taught at Jesus' time that people were crippled because of their own sin or the sin of their parents. The apostles themselves had once asked at the sight of a blind man, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" Jesus answered, "*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.*"

"*Your sins are forgiven.*" The paralytic had always wondered in the back of his mind if that was what caused all of this. His heart skipped with an odd sense of joy and relief as a burden he had always sensed but could never put his finger on suddenly was lifted. God loved him, even though he was paralyzed. God had always loved him. His paralysis was not a sign of God's hatred; it was what brought him through a roof and to the foot of His Savior, who first set Him free from the most dreadful sickness of sin before, in a less impressive feat, sent him away on his own two feet.

One numb man down, a crowd full to go. No, they were not physically numb, but they were numb nonetheless, because they failed to see their most desperate need in Jesus' offer of forgiveness and they failed to recognize their most gracious God in Jesus' person. Like me after my spinal tap, they did not yet feel the pain of their lost condition, but, unless their numbness was worn away by the law before it was too late, they would most certainly feel it later. They were perfectly willing to accept physical blessings from Jesus, but not forgiveness. They were perhaps perfectly willing to give Jesus payment for His healing work, but not to give Him their sins. They were spiritually numb.

Do you see yourself in the paralytic at all? I pray you do. Think back. Perhaps you were too young to remember it, but you can at least imagine it. You too could not walk to Christ yourself. You too were carried to Him by another. You too had no idea what your greatest need was, yet what happened to you surely lifted a burden you had never been able to put your finger on before. You too heard those beautiful, powerful words declare through water what only God can declare: "*Your sins are forgiven.*" No, you were not healed by paralysis, but "*Get up and take your mat*" is not the most spectacular sentence today; "*Your sins are forgiven*" is.

You've learned to walk since then. You've walked out of the Savior's house many times, but that spectacular sentence, by God's grace, has kept you coming back: "*Your sins are forgiven.*" And your sins are forgiven. Let the excitement fill the air. Breathe in the wonder. Let your jaws drop and your eyes rise as you try to understand this Jesus, who redeems body and soul, who weds the human and divine in His person and with His Word. Let your minds spin with astonishment as Jesus absolves you, wiping away every stain of sin like Windex cleaning glass, so that, where before there was only a dim and smudged view of some generic god, now you see your merciful Father. And take heart, because, while your absolution and healing may be a little farther apart than the paralytic's, your perfect and eternal healing is coming in the resurrection.

There was no room for critics in Jesus' house, as He makes clear by His response to the teachers of the law. His house was a hospital for sinners, not a showroom for saints, and it still is. Those who would tell the Messiah what kind of Messiah to be or how to be it must step aside, while Jesus tends to those who know their helplessness and seek His mercy.

In the beginning of this service, we confessed our helplessness as poor, miserable sinners. In His mercy, Jesus spoke that miraculous sentence to us that He spoke to the paralytic in the Absolution: "*My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven.*" Who can ever completely take that sentence in? Who can ever find it anything less than everything? Through your Baptism, relived through Absolution, He may have spoken that sweet sentence to you a thousand times already, but each time feels like the first time to hungry hearts, especially when we remember why our Savior can speak those words: because those sins He takes from you were placed on Him on the cross, and though He rose again, walking out of His tomb, they are now dead and gone forever, as far from us as the east is from the west. None of you came in Jesus' house paralyzed today, but your greatest need was just the same and just as desperate as his, and Jesus answer to that need is just as great. "*My sons, my daughters, your sins are forgiven.*" What words could dance in our ears more gracefully than these? No, even numb ears must tingle with such grace. Amen.