

“Be of Good Cheer”

Preached on The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ

Oct. 10, 2021

Text: Matt. 9: 1-8; Eph. 4: 17-30

The Gospel lesson for today speaks to us about the liberating power of forgiveness. A man with palsy lying on a bed is brought by his friends to Jesus. By now the Lord's power to heal has been announced far and wide, and those who care about this sick man carry him to Jesus in hopes of a miracle. What came next was even more amazing. "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee."

As we've seen before, the miracles of Jesus, like his parables, are always illustrations of a point. We must think about them and look beneath the surface to grasp their true significance. Today's story illustrates the crippling power of sin, and the healing power of forgiveness to liberate and heal us.

Sin is deceitful and insidious, while presenting an attractive face. We crave freedom from commandment and restriction, liberty to do what we like, when we like, and as we like. This idea of freedom is very popular in our world. To sophisticated modern people, many older moral standards seem intolerable restrictions imposed upon our freedom. We might grant that they seemed necessary in bygone days, when there was a premium placed on conformity and solidarity in the face of a dangerous world. But through the growth of liberalism, individualism, consumerism, and the attendant breakdown of authoritative moral communities, we now see maximal personal choice as our birthright. We have come of age, and need not slavishly and uncritically adhere to past traditions and codes of conduct. We are not hemmed in by rigid roles and oppressive norms that make us deny our true, "authentic" selves. We can dispense with a one-size-fits-all morality and march to the beat of our different drummers. Since each of us is a moral authority, our decisions and beliefs (with few exceptions) are beyond criticism. Individual expression is the highest of values; curtailing it is the only sin left.

But this modern view of freedom is really a cheat, a shadow, a parody of true freedom. It is the diabolical temptation in the ancient garden: "Ye shall be as gods," said the devil, "knowing good and evil," establishing good and evil in your own judgment. You will be free of God's lordship; and that is a good thing. After all, He makes these rules because he likes to keep you down. He is threatened by your independence. Throwing off his yoke will be the beginning of your true grandeur—that's the devil's promise.

It's all there in Genesis. Adam and Eve are ejected from the garden of God's presence, and that is followed by Cain's murdering his brother, Abel. Even nature rises up against humans, and produces thorns and thistles to impede their labor. What was meant for joy is turned to sorrow. Our claim to independence and the self-sufficiency of our

private judgement separates us from God, and destroys community; it destroys our fellowship with one another; it cripples us, and spreads a paralysis through our life. We turn in upon ourselves and shrivel up in isolation. That is sin's deadly logic.

Only if we understand this can we really understand true liberty. We are told that true freedom means constructing our own narrative, coming to live "our truth." So we convince ourselves that we are under no laws but those to which we consent. We are the law-giver— yet, strangely, also the law-breaker.

If honest, we know at some level that we cannot even remain true to our own values, those we have supposedly self-authorized. We have this strange sense that we have failed morally. We need forgiveness, but how? The conventional wisdom says that "you need to forgive yourself." But if you are the authority behind your moral standards, how do explain what feels like some *external* and unyielding judgment upon you? This is perplexing. We all definitely have had the experience of falling short of the standards we supposedly authorized. Somehow we need forgiveness. Yet who are we to forgive ourselves?

For to forgive is to forgive another. Someone has done something that has hurt us, and we stand in a position to forgive or not to forgive. So it seems that if you are to forgive yourself, you must posit a different "you" who is morally offended by what the other "you" did or didn't do. One of "you" is in the dock; the other "you" is the judge. And because you are a very close friend of the judge, he should just let you off with a slap on the wrist. Wouldn't it be wonderful if things worked that way. But this scenario does not seem tenable, as billions of guilty consciences can attest.

We started out with the hope of an exhilarating freedom from external restraints and restrictions, and ended up with a guilty conscience that we really shouldn't have. We want to be free; but we also want to be clean. We want to be free from the burden of our sins, but find that we cannot free ourselves from that burden. We are hungry for the forgiveness of and communion with the True God, not the false gods we know ourselves to be. We want real life, but we are not qualified to bestow it.

When we come to the end of our rope, we are ready to receive the life that can only be found in God. It is the grace of God, in Christ, which forgives us. It restores us to a right relation to one who alone is qualified to forgive the sins that are ultimately sins against Him. In a paradox that the worldly cannot fathom, we attain true freedom through trust in the Lord, through obedience and walking in his ways. We cannot attain this through our own strength, no matter how competent we believe ourselves to be. To know ourselves forgiven is like rising from a bed of sickness, sound in life and limb. "Then saith he to the sick of the palsy, Arise, take up thy bed and go unto thy house. But when the multitude saw it, they marveled, and glorified God, who had given such power unto men."

Well might we marvel and glorify God, for the power of forgiveness is a miraculous and world-transforming power. Our Epistle lesson from Ephesians is a wonderful account of that transforming power. We need no longer walk as false gods, who walk "in the

vanity of [our] mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God..." We can now walk in the light, and not have a troubled conscience and the anxiety attendant on the constant fear of judgment. We can put off the old way of life and "put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." We can be free of our futile attempts at self-justification and "be renewed in the spirit of [our] mind."

Those taught by Christ can who know the meaning of forgiveness, can put off those things which separate us from God and from one another. We don't need to see our brothers and sisters as threats, people we must somehow keep in the dark about our vulnerabilities. We don't have to view all our relations with others as a game of manipulation, where we try to seek our own advantage, but pretend otherwise. We don't have to believe that everything is a zero-sum game where we can only win if someone else loses. If we are truly the Body of Christ, then one person's pain is shared throughout; but one person's joy is a joy for all. We will put "away lying, speak[ing] every man truth with his neighbour; for we are members one of another." Make sure that all your work and all your words serve charity; that what you do and say will build up, and not tear down the Church; that it will "minister grace unto the hearers." This is God's recipe for a new and better world.

But how do we go about all this? How do we become renewed in the spirit of our mind? Only by our conscious thankfulness of God's gracious gift to us. Nothing is more essential to Christian spiritual life than that thankful recognition. We can put away bitterness and forgive one another, only as we truly understand that God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us. That is truly liberating knowledge. The cornerstone of our daily prayers should be thanksgiving for our spiritual mercies in Christ Jesus, 'for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory'. The Prayer of General Thanksgiving in the Prayer Book (page 14) is a good place to begin. If that thankfulness shapes and rules our hearts, it will also rule our lives; and, with the multitude who saw the healing of the paralyzed man, we too will marvel, and glorify God, who has given such power unto men.

In the Name...