

Sermon for Trinity 19 – Matthew 9:1-8

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

“And behold, some people brought to Him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.’” “Jesus saw their faith” today’s Gospel tells us. What is this faith? John the Apostle tells us that our faith is the victory which overcomes the world. So faith is a struggle. St. Paul even calls it a “fight.” “...To fight the good fight of faith.” It’s the way of fighting that done in a competition, where only one can win the prize. When Paul looks back upon his own life, he can say without reservation that he has fought the good fight. He has finished the course. He has succeeded in that on which all depends. He has kept the faith.

But if faith is a fight who is the opponent? Against what enemy must faith fight? The struggle is against the enemies of Christ who are also our enemies. The bible tells us they are the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. They battle against our faith. From the very beginning, the disciples had to meet all kinds of opposition. More often than not, those who kept the faith were threatened, imprisoned, and put to death, even as their Lord and Master was. But before that, they also faced skepticism: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Or disdain: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Or even in today’s Gospel, after Jesus forgave the paralytic, the scribes grumbled: “This man is blaspheming.” “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” The Pharisees rebuked Him as a blasphemer because He forgave sins while being a man. Yet still, the Pharisees located their forgiveness in their human works, merits, fasting, and praying – all of which a paralyzed man is unable to do as they did. What is this but stealing God’s honor and ascribing it to oneself?

In one sense, though, we are the paralyzed man. As we are at times drowned in unbelief, ingratitude, and other sins, we are spiritually paralyzed. As paralysis makes a whole man’s body useless and powerless to do anything, so unbelief, doubt, and sin makes our whole body useless for any good works: we turn our eyes from those who need us, our ears from God’s Word, our hands from helping, and our feet from visiting others. How can a paralyzed man fight the fight of faith?

The fight against faith comes not only from outside of us, but inside us, too. Our Old Adam neither can nor will obey the law of God. Neither can it believe. It must be crucified. And just as it does not die here in our lifetime, so neither is it silent with its onslaught against our faith. Our sinful nature remains at enmity with God. And it is a fight. We have constant sins which plague us. We’re ashamed to ask for forgiveness even when we know we’re wrong. We wallow in self-pity when we feel that God has dealt us an unfortunate hand in life. The inevitable question that arises in today’s Gospel Jesus asks to the grumbling Pharisees, “Which is easier: to forgive sins or to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Arise, take up your bed and walk?’” Well, which is it? What if you were asked that question? If we hold onto grudges and don’t forgive from the heart – I tell you

it may be more possible for someone to rise from the dead than for us to forgive! May it not be so among us!

... And then again, faith wouldn't be a fight if the enemy within wasn't real and powerful ...

How then can our faith become so vigorous that it overcomes the world? How can it be done? It really has not so much to do with our faith, but whom our faith is in: Jesus Christ—"Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

This faith is unconquerable. It binds us to Christ Himself. We are joined to Him who has overcome the world. If we believe in Christ, then Christ dwells within us. "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." Our victory does not depend on our faith, but on Christ, to whom faith holds fast. And therefore our struggling faith, in which we feel weak, doubtful, and questioning, is so much stronger than a faith that feels itself strong. A "strong" faith trusts in its experiences, its feelings, and its earlier victories, but not in Jesus. A weak faith has nothing else to do but to trust in Him. When God permits us to fail, He wishes to teach to rely entirely on Christ.

Nothing determines eternity except faith in this crucified, resurrected Jesus. Not works, not suffering, not knowledge, not feelings. It's only faith in Christ alone that gives peace and quietness, strength and steadfastness, clarity and harmony of soul. You'll find these nowhere else. Whoever counts on works, feelings, knowledge, or previous victories as if they should make him holy, is lost.

Christ and His Word give us faith. To strengthen this faith, we must not neglect His Word: the Law which accuses us. The Gospel which comforts us.

"And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.'" All the gifts of God are promised to us in the forgiveness of our sins. With sin put away, we know that the Resurrection on the Last Day will yield for us true healing, everlasting life, and full communion with God. Since that is our destiny, how can we not live lives of thankfulness, love, and joy here on earth? What are you thankful for? Next week is Stewardship Sunday. How will you respond to the Lord in thankfulness this coming year? Will you volunteer for something that is out of your comfort zone? Will you commit a generous portion of your gifts to God's work in this place? I trust you will, and by God's strength, serve Him whole-heartedly who gave His life for you. And because of His death so it is said of you: "You have overcome the evil one." Take heart, your sins are forgiven. In Christ you have fought the good fight and won the victory. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠