



Roanoke, Virginia
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“The Only Healing Left”

Luke 5:17-26

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Today’s sermon is Part II of an *unofficial* sermon series. I say it is unofficial because I had no idea that Elizabeth’s sermon last week was going to dovetail so nicely with the passage I was working on for this week.

Elizabeth’s sermon was on forgiveness. Better said, she talked about the human side of forgiving; having to forgive over and over again because to live is to wrong and be wronged. “**How many times must I forgive?**” Jesus is asked. “**Seven times?**” “**No, seven times seventy.**” Keep at it because we are never going to get living right.

This past week, I talked to Jeff Luckett about this passage. He quoted Steven Wright who said: “**When I was in school the teachers told me practice makes perfect; then they told me nobody’s perfect, so I stopped practicing.**” He’s right. To practice to be perfect is a project doomed to fail. But practicing forgiveness—now that is a project that has potential to keep a life from degrading into score-keeping, grievances, resentments, and petty grudges.

Again, this is to speak of the human side of forgiveness. Today, we deal with the flip side—the *divine* side—of forgiveness. Have a listen... and listen for the Word of God.

¹⁷ One day while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem were sitting nearby, and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. ¹⁸ Just then some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, ¹⁹ but, finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down on the stretcher through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. ²⁰ When he saw their faith, he said, “**Friend, your sins are forgiven you.**” ²¹ Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to



question, “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?”²² When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?²³ Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’?²⁴ But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the one who was paralyzed—“I say to you, stand up and take your stretcher and go to your home.”²⁵ Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God.²⁶ Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with fear, saying, “We have seen incredible things today.”

I mentioned Martha Delany in concerns. The family has given me permission to give a report in this sermon on how Martha is doing.

As some of you know, Martha suffered a stroke last month that left her partially paralyzed and unable to speak. For this to happen to someone in her early 30s is quite shocking and upsetting. Her mom, Anne Delany, immediately flew to Denver to be with Martha as she received intensive treatment at Craig Hospital—fortunately one of the world’s leading institutions in dealing with neurorehabilitation.

Anne texted me almost daily and I have been able to follow Martha’s remarkable recovery in real time. It is far from over. She has a long way to go and still needs prayers. However, her recovery has dramatically exceeded expectations. At first, she could not speak but now is not only conversational but has her sense of humor back. Her physical recovery is a month ahead of where her specialists thought she would be. Anne was kind enough to send me videos of her walking smoothly with a walker and pulling weights with both arms. Credit goes to:

- The specialists and rehab personnel of Craig Hospital,
- Martha’s young age and good attitude
- and the support of her family.

Still, even with modern medicine, family support and Martha’s attitude and youth in mind, it feels miraculous so far, this amazing recovery. Thank God.

With Martha’s recovery in mind, it is hard not to see the healing of paralysis as the main thing to celebrate in our passage. I mean, we heard Jesus declare the man’s sins to be forgiven and then have an argument about it, but a paralyzed guy gets up and walks out the door? Is that what is so amazing that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this story?

I don’t think so. That doesn’t stop me from celebrating a paralytic recovering, and it encourages the celebration of the video of Martha walking. Jesus calls the healing of the paralytic a sign of something greater, but it is a wonderful sign, isn’t it, a recovery like this? So we celebrate it.

I will tell you what I thought was remarkable about this passage when I was a kid. It was those pals tearing a hole in the roof and lowering their paralyzed friend through it. We all need pals like that sometimes like that, don’t we? We all need advocates like that. As I said, one of the reasons Martha is doing so well is that she has an amazing advocate in her mother who is a nurse,



and in other family members like Mary Ellyson in Denver or Morgan Morris here in Roanoke who do what they can to

- help the medical staff and Martha all do their part,
- be the listeners, the doers, the interpreters, the encouragers, the facilitators.

Blessed are those advocates who do not let obstacles get in the way of getting care to the ones needing it.

- Blessed are advocates who attend doctor appointments with loved ones to ask questions and help interpret what is said.
- Blessed are advocates who listen to the doctors, but also help the doctors listen to what the patient is trying to say.
- Blessed are advocates who go on the tour of retirement or care facilities on behalf of another to help find the best next home.
- Blessed are advocates who, on behalf of one needing care, will help fill out confusing forms and listen to terrible music while on hold.

Blessed are advocates, and this passage encourages us to celebrate them. So, we do.

But I don't think advocacy is the most amazing part of this passage. I think we get close to what is most amazing when we let the scribes and Pharisees have their say... even though *they are mad when they say it*. What amazes them is that Jesus speaks as if he has the authority to forgive the man of his sinfulness.

The passage says, “of his sins,” but I think it is more to the point to say “of his sinfulness.” I say that because despite how they are sometime described, Pharisees in Jesus' day are not all ungracious, legalistic, prudes. Though, to be sure, there are extremists among them (and Jesus no doubt has run ins with some of those), Pharisees can be gracious people. They have their ways of dealing with the human side of forgiveness. Not many of them are likely to agree with Jesus when he says we need to forgive seventy times seven because they are as concerned for the well-being of the community as they are for the status of one's heart. I may need to forgive others, so I don't stay stuck even if the other does, but the Pharisees are businesspeople who care about rules and business ethics. When you have your family to feed, sometimes hugging it out isn't enough. They also want to protect the safety and health of the community. Some wrongs are worse than others, and they have rules about such things—policies and processes to deal with levels of severity. Gossiping about a friend is different from stealing from the savings of the elderly after all. When someone wrecks a family, incites a riot, or is careless as to cause someone to lose a limb or a life, you can't just say, “Oh, forget about it.”

- Victim's rights are real.
- Enabling bad behavior is a thing.

Pharisees would say that there are wrongs that are so wrong, the one responsible should be shunned, maybe put through some steps, maybe excommunicated, maybe executed... though you need Roman help to do that.



On the human side of forgiveness, they and Jesus would have a lot to discuss and debate, just as we have a lot to discuss and debate when it comes to

- what deserves a fine and what deserves jail time,
- whether incarceration should be punitive or restorative,
- whether the death penalty is a different means of claiming God’s authority or even effective in lowering crime—

or on the inter-personal, non-legal, side of things,

- what it means to have and enforce boundaries,
- and how can one forgive when the other will not admit the wrong.

Lots to talk about and discuss. The human side of forgiveness is hard and complicated because life is hard and complicated.

But what Jesus does, that is different. He forgives *sinfulness*. That’s the only way to make sense of what Jesus says. After all, he doesn’t know all that the man has done, so how can he forgive *all that the man has done*. And, AND, AND, he says, “**Go and sin no more.**” That’s the “**Be ye therefore perfect**” line all over again. We all know the guy’s going to mess up again, unless he drops dead the moment he walks out the door. Perfection is not possible, (Right, Steven Wright?) so why practice it.

Unless Jesus is not speaking about specific actions or thoughts but is speaking of this final act of healing that only God can provide. This healing: the healing of our very selves so that we are not judged by the accumulation of our successes or failures but declared as worthy simply because we are forgiven and loved by God.

That is a different healing altogether. It is not something I can give you or you can give me. So, “**By what authority do you forgive this man’s sins, Jesus? Only God can grant such healing.**”

This is going to frustrate the scribes and Pharisees, but I’m not going to engage in the argument they want to have. My sermon today is about proclaiming the Gospel of Christ, not defending it. Making the case for or against Jesus being God-Among-Us is a discussion for another day. In fact, there is even room for those who do not believe in the divinity of Jesus to hear the good news of what Jesus says. For the doubter, Jesus speaks to the possibility and for the believer, Jesus speaks to the news, that God—whoever is before, beneath and beyond the lives we live—that God is not sitting as a judge in a game show called Life keeping score and calculating if we are just good enough and just not bad enough to be worthy of the final healing that Jesus declares for the paralytic.

David Zahl and Jonathan Linebaugh helped me think about this. I heard them both on Mockingbird podcasts. They helped me see the paralytic as a clarifying example of what it means to be human.

Linebaugh says (and I’m paraphrasing) that most of us spend our lives *auditioning*. We write a biography while carrying the burden of being loved. Most of us live with this knowledge of a gap between who we are and who we think we ought to be. We are concerned, as I said two Sundays ago, about being enough.



Zahl directly addressed the paralytic. I have to be careful here because the Bible deals with the paralysis as a sign. Physical paralysis is some level of disability, and many disabilities can be dealt with and not be barriers to a good and full life—especially in the modern age of medicine and rehab.

But as this paralysis is presented in the Bible in a much harsher age, it is presented as a sign or a symbol of a moral condition; of no longer being able to live under the illusion that one can make up for all one's wrongs or fix what is broken. Zahl says it presents the kind of clarity sometimes found in prison or at the end of life. Prison and Hospice chaplains speak of situations where an individual is robbed of the comfort of denial. They have to look at the stone-cold reality that they cannot undo or redo that which they have done to cause harm. In prison, some are trapped not only by walls but by the knowledge that they can never undo the harm their crimes have caused. At the end of life, even people who have lived lives that we would admire get stuck in regret over memories of where they failed or fell short and they wonder the ledger will tip their way when it comes to God having a final say. And these chaplains can tell of beautiful moments when they see prisoners, or the dying hear it and get it; that their wrongs do not define them before God.

Zahl looks at the paralytic and guesses that whether he has lived a commendable life or a contemptible one, he has come to define himself by his accumulated wrongs. He has put together his own portfolio

- of missed opportunities,
- of regret over those things he wishes he had said or done,
 - or not said or done.

And there is nothing he can do about it. Regret, maybe shame, is his identity. And it is his identity. And Jesus heals his identity. Jesus looks at him and says in effect, “**Good or bad, you are not what you have done. You are who you are in the loving eyes of God. Your identity is healed. At the end, there is no help for you but God. But God grants the final healing. You don't have to take your sins with you. You are forgiven. Now go live that way.**”

I have come to the end of my sermon having spoken of clarifying moments at the end of health and end of life that are true about all of life; we need a final healing because we can't possibly repair all the wrongs of life.

I offer a final illustration that comes at the beginning of life. It is the baptism of Paige Gibson McGhee. Her baptism this morning declares the same truth even before Paige has much of an opportunity to commit the wrongs and create the harm that will one day weigh on her as regret, and if allowed to go too far, as shame.

Paige, Jesus speaks with the voice of God in telling you that even now, “**Your sins are forgiven. Now grow up and live your life. Live out an identity not defined by the accumulation of success and failure, but as a child loved by God. For that is who you are.**” We don't want you to forget it, and that is why your parents and your church will keep reminding you of the truth of the healing only God can provide: “**Your sinfulness is forgiven. Now live.**”

