

7th Sunday after Epiphany
(Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time)
Isaiah 43:18-25; Psalm 41; Mark 2:1-12; II Corinthians 1:18-22

Mark 2:1-12 is the story of how Jesus both healed the paralysis and forgave the sins of a paralytic. The profound implications of the story, which would have been shockingly self-evident to its original hearers, is less clear to us who read it today because we do not appreciate the revolutionary nature of the assertion Jesus is making that creates such consternation with the “powers that be”.

There are two distinct but related themes interwoven in this story, which makes of this healing far more than simply a healing. The two themes are the healing/saving of the paralytic man and Jesus’ conflict with religious leaders who represent the Jerusalem Clergy Aristocracy.

The story begins with such a crowd around Jesus that the friends of a paralytic can’t get the man to Jesus because of the press of the people. So they have the temerity to drag the paralyzed man up onto the roof of Peter’s house, tear open a hole¹, and let him down by ropes tied to his cot so that he literally “drops in” at Jesus’ feet (2:1-4)! Jesus is struck, not by the faith of the paralytic but by that of the men determined to get him to Jesus. He then says to the paralytic, “Son your sins are forgiven” (2:5).

Scribes, standing by, take considerable umbrage at these words of Jesus, and mutter to each other “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone” (2:6-7)? Jesus discerns their complaint and confronts them. “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” – Jesus then turns to the paralytic and addresses him, “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home” (2:8-11). The man does so and the crowds are amazed and glorify God (vs. 12).

In the centuries surrounding the life of Jesus, the Jewish people believed that there was a direct correlation between health and holiness. If you were a person living in significant, unforgiven sin, such nonforgiveness would be manifested through illness. Thus, if a person had a permanent medical condition such as paralysis, that would indicate that he had deep unresolved sin in his life. Therefore, since this man was paralyzed, he was obviously a great sinner and he was receiving exactly what he deserved from God. The only way a paralytic like this man could be healed, any Jew would have believed, would be for his sins to be forgiven. And only God was capable of forgiving such sin.

To the Jews who ran the religious, political and economic systems of Israel, this would be a pivotal belief for maintaining the structures of society as they were (with these leaders on the top and the expendables like this man on the bottom). For the Jewish peasant, however, life would be far more pragmatic. If Jesus could heal someone like this paralytic, let him heal him. Let the

¹ The roofs of houses in Israel at the time of Jesus were flat, and covered by branches and dried clay supported by wooden beams. What these men likely did, therefore, was to remove the branches and the clay (easily repairable) and to let the man down between the wooden beams that supported the roof.

authorities argue about the niceties; the poor would simply take advantage of the opportunities that would come their way!

But for Jesus to act, not (initially) to heal this man, but to *forgive* him was beyond belief! This man was paralyzed because he would not repent of deep sin in his life. Therefore, God had paralyzed him because of this sin. If God had paralyzed him, only God could remove that paralysis and heal him. And that could happen only if God would first forgive him. For Jesus to pronounce forgiveness was for Jesus to put himself in the place of God. And there was only one word to describe such effrontery: blasphemy!

Is this truly blasphemy? Or has Jesus actually been given the authority from God to forgive sin? The only way to prove it one way or another is to heal the man. If, in the thinking of that day, the man is healed, then it is clear that Jesus has been given such authority from God and the charge of blasphemy is false. If he cannot heal him, then obviously, Jesus can't forgive him either and he should be stoned for blasphemy. Thus, Jesus joins the contest with the scribes, much as had Elijah with the priests of Ba'al (I Kings 18:20-40). He says to the paralytic, "Stand up, take up your cot and go to your home". And immediately, the man does so! Jesus has indeed been given the authority by God to forgive sins!

The struggle between Jesus and the religious leaders is around his right and capacity to forgive sins. And he clearly wins that struggle here in the eyes of the people! But not in the eyes of the elite! To these representatives of the Jewish aristocracy, Jesus had made them and their interpretation and adjudication of the Law fools before the people. Jesus had committed the unforgiveable sin – not against God, but against Israel's leadership. Thus, the charge of blasphemy here leveled for the first time by these scribes is the charge the Jerusalem religious aristocracy will eventually level at Jesus at the trial that will bring about his death (Mark 14:64)!

This story was written by Mark to make clear that Jesus here challenged the authority of the "principalities and powers" of Israel. In his actions and words, Jesus eliminated both the sinfulness and the paralysis of this man, thus exposing to the people the invalidity of the interpretation given to the Law by the leaders of Israel that maintained society to their and to Rome's benefit. And Jesus does so in a way that inevitably provokes controversy -- a controversy that didn't just come upon Jesus, but was initiated by him and carried through to its scribal-defeating conclusion! Thus, the battle between Jesus and the Jewish systems is joined. And it is intriguing that the Master's next encounter with scribal authorities will be with official government investigators from Jerusalem (3:22), as they slowly build their case to get this trouble-maker eliminated!

Isaiah 43:18-25 reminds us, "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I (God) am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it" (43:18-19a)?

It is extremely difficult for old structures, old systems and the people who maintain them to perceive God moving in new ways. That was an essential problem of the Jewish aristocracy at the time of Jesus, and it was an essential problem of the Jews living in Babylonian captivity. They could not perceive God "about to do a new thing". And because they couldn't be open to

new ways, they would try to quench the movement of the Spirit and have to end up being quenched themselves.

In Isaiah 43, the author uses two metaphors in order to urge Israel to be receptive to God's movement in their midst and in the world. The first metaphor is that of the Exodus (vss. 19-21). God led Israel out of the familiarity of Egypt where, even though they were slaves groaning under the harshest of treatment, they at least knew what to expect. He led them out into the wilderness where everything was new and therefore intimidating. But the fact is that God made a way for them in that desert, shaped them in that wilderness into the people he wanted them to be and then brought them into a new land. So God will do the same today, as he leads Israel out of Babylon and will take them through a wilderness without travail back to their Promised Land.

The second metaphor is that of a courtroom. Israel is on trial for doubting God and thus sinning against God (vss. 22-25). They sinned against God by not sacrificing to him and by abandoning him. But despite Israel's guilt, God will forgive them – for by nature, God is a forgiving God. "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (vs. 25).

It is in the nature of God to forgive sins, not to hold sin against the people. He wants to set free the paralytic, not keep him in thrall and under judgment. Thus, God forgave Israel when they had sinned with the golden calf (Exod. 34:6-7; cf. Luke 5:21). So the Lord will forgive the doubting and timid response of Israel to proposed release from Babylon. And God will forgive paralytics and heal them! But God will not forgive those who, because of their bondage to the systems and structures that maintain a status quo that destroys people, refuse to perceive what they are doing, avoid being accountable and quench the new work the Spirit would do in their midst.

Psalm 41, which deals with assurances of God's help in a time of personal crisis and vulnerability. It is the opening verses of the psalm that particularly attract me, however.

"Happy are those who consider the poor; the Lord delivers them in the day of trouble. The Lord protects them and keeps them alive; they are called happy in the land. You do not give them up to the will of their enemies. The Lord sustains them on their sickbed; in their illness you heal all their infirmities" (41:1-3).

It is those Israelites who "consider the poor" who are singled out for praise in this psalm. In fulfilling the primary command and expectation in Deuteronomy ("There is to be no poor among you" – Deut. 15:4), such faithful believers of God demonstrate their faithfulness to God. They have embraced for their lives one of the two chief imperatives of their faith – commitment to the elimination of poverty in order to "balance" their society, and love of God.

The next two verses are ambiguous (vss. 2-3), because the psalm speaks of "they", but there is no indicator as to whether the psalmist is referring to the poor so embraced, or the Israelites who have embraced them. Interpreted either way, the statement is powerful. Perhaps the author

meant it to be intentionally ambiguous as he spoke about both of them. Either way, the Psalmist is saying:

- ? God protects such people;
- ? They experience happiness as a result of combating poverty;
- ? They will be protected from their enemies by God;
- ? They will be sustained and healed.

After this psalm makes its point that the Israelite will be blessed when they will be responsible toward the poor, it then continues in verses 4 through 10 to look at what happens to the person who doesn't commit himself to the implementation of that Deuteronomic command to work for the elimination of poverty. The psalmist declares:

“My enemies wonder in malice when I will die, and my name perish, and when they come to see me, they utter empty words, while their hearts gather mischief” (vss. 5-6a). He continues, “Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me” (vs. 9).

In other words, what happens to the man or woman who does not focus his life on a commitment to the empowering of the poor, powerless and marginalized? Why, he becomes fixated upon his own problems. He becomes self-centered. He becomes paranoid! Everybody is trying to get him. Everyone is trying to ruin him. The person who is concerned only with himself and the advancement of his own agenda is a person who is separated from his neighbor. And because he is separated from his neighbor, he is separated from God. And he is separated from God because he has lost compassion and commitment to the vulnerable, marginalized and powerless in his world.

What, then, is this poor fixated man to do? He needs to repent of his self-absorption, become open to God's grace and thereby rediscover his neighbor. “But you, O Lord, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may repay them (the poor). By this I know that you are pleased with me” (vss. 10-11a).

This psalm is a compelling reminder to us all about what the focus of our life should be about!

Incidentally, the final benediction of this psalm, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen” (vs. 13), is not meant to be a part of this particular psalm. Rather, this particular collection of Israel's psalms that began with Psalm 1 concludes at this point. It is the completion of Book I (i.e., the first full scroll of psalms). Thus, this benediction is to record that completion.

II Corinthians 1:18-22 is Paul's triumphant cry, “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom Silvanus, Timothy and I proclaimed among you, was not ‘Yes and No’; but in him it is always ‘Yes’” (1:19). Paul and his fellow laborers in Christ have always acted with integrity in their ministry with the Christians in Corinth, the apostle contends, for in the following of Jesus, ministry is always a “yes” to him and to God's people.

The task of the faithful follower of Christ is to proclaim the truth as revealed to one through the Holy Spirit and defensible from scripture, the great apostle contends here. God's word through Jesus to Christ's Church and to the world is a clear and unqualified "Yes" that boldly proclaims the truth, no matter the fall-out. Consequently, that is the task of those who follow Jesus and provide leadership to God's people.

In our own speech and actions, we are to proclaim the absolute truthfulness and reliability of God's words in Christ. Toward that end we are "anointed"², "sealed"³ and given the "guarantee"⁴ of the Holy Spirit to empower us to undertake ministry that must often be confrontive while calling for perceiving reality in a new way (vss. 21-22).

This is what Paul is doing, as he seeks both to speak truth to the Church in Corinth and call its people to spiritual, financial and moral accountability. It is what the author of Isaiah 43 did in urging those who were captives in Babylon to leave the safety of their subjugation and step out into a new wilderness promising them liberation. It is what the Psalmist did in calling the people of Israel to center their lives on compassion for and service of the poor, not on their own welfare. And it is what Jesus did when he confronted the representatives of the political, religious and economic systems of Roman-dominated Israel as well as the people to break from their theological straight-jackets and recognize that God was moving in unconventional ways through the carpenter of Nazareth!

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² "Anointing" was an Old Testament ritual in which oil was poured on a person's head to indicate that they had been chosen by God for a specific task, ministry or office (cf. I Sam. 2:10; 6:13). It indicates God's choice and call to one to serve God, God's people and the world.

³ A seal was an official act in the Old Testament, usually done by a king, that represented the authority of or the ownership of the one using that seal, and afforded protection to the one carrying that seal or that sealed document (cf. Esther 8:8; Dan. 6:17; Matt. 27:66; Rev. 7:3). Thus, God has "sealed" us with the Holy Spirit to perform the official duty He has given us.

⁴ The "guarantee" was a legal term in the Greek world in which a deposit or down payment would be made in an economic transaction in order to guarantee that the entire payment would be forthcoming.