

“But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins” – then He said to the paralytic, ‘Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’” [Matthew 9.6; NKJV]

What does forgiveness do? Well, every Sunday, congregations gather here and elsewhere, and if that congregation happens to be a truly Lutheran one, the main course served to those present will be the forgiveness of sins. This almost sounds a bit boring. And there are those who would chime in and say, “It not only sounds boring, it is boring. Let’s get on to something else! After all, we all know that we are forgiven.” Aside from the question of whether everyone present at a given service does know that we are forgiven, it does appear that, after a while, a steady diet of the same course might cause forgiveness to turn stale. And, indeed for many, truth be told, the message of the forgiveness is just that – stale.

But, it ought not be stale, and it ought be a diet for which the mind thirsts, if the mind understands what it is that, on a perpetual basis, forgiveness does. So, today, your attention is invited to the Holy Gospel of the Day, by which you can ponder “How Forgiveness Works.”

I.

Throughout the chapter which

precedes today’s text in the Gospel According to St. Matthew, Jesus is seen healing a variety of people: a man with leprosy, a paralyzed servant of a Roman Centurion, Peter’s mother-in-law who was sick with a fever, and two demon-possessed men. He also demonstrates to His disciples His power over the wind and the waves as He calms a severe storm while with them in a boat.

Today’s Holy Gospel follows these miracles. Jesus arrives back in His adult home city, Capernaum, and He is found preaching in a crowded home. A paralytic is brought to Him on a stretcher. And when He sees the faith of those who brought this man to Him, Jesus says to the paralytic, “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you.” In the crowd are some of the Jewish leaders, sent to spy on our Lord, and they think to themselves, “This Man blasphemes.” Jesus here shows His divine nature as He says to them, “Why do you think evil in your hearts?” Only God knows the depths of a person’s thoughts! And, here, Jesus knows their thoughts! Jesus continues: “For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Arise and walk’?”

What is His point? His point is this: If you say, “Your sins are

forgiven you,” nothing appears to have changed. Forgiveness does not come to a person as some blue gas entering his ear. But, if you say, “Arise and walk,” something does change, something that everyone can see. Therefore, Jesus continues, “that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins,” He then turns to the paralytic and says, “Arise, take up your bed, and go to your home.” And everyone present is stunned to see the paralytic do just that. This paralyzed man stands up, walks around, takes his own stretcher under his arm, and goes home, healed and forgiven. Had Jesus not performed that miracle, the man would have been carried home on that stretcher. He would have been forgiven, but no one would have known it, except for faith in Christ’s words. But now, believer and unbeliever alike know that this man is forgiven, because they see that he is healed.

And the Gospel account concludes with these words: “Now when the multitudes saw it, they marveled and glorified God, who had given such power to men.” What power is it that causes them to marvel? Not the healing, though that was the trigger, the catalyst. That Jesus

can heal is already known to them. In fact, Christ’s healing ministry is probably what packed the people into and around the house. But, the real cause of their marveling is what Jesus claimed and the healing proved, namely, that this man Jesus has the power on earth to forgive sins!

II.

So, forgiveness of sins today can be found on earth, where God assigns it to be. In the New Testament, Jesus is the ark of the covenant. He bears in His body on the holy cross the evidence of the sins of mankind, and by His shed blood, God the Father’s fierce and holy anger against sin is set aside, all the sins of mankind are covered, and the office of the apostolic ministry is sent forth, to sprinkle the blood-bought forgiveness of sins on God’s people.

Jesus shows us how it is that forgiveness is to be found on earth. He speaks to His apostles-to-be in the upper room: “He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” So, God, with His forgiveness, wishes to be found on earth, where the Holy Spirit gathers faithful sinners around the Word

and Sacraments, through which sins are forgiven them.

Hence, you see anew why we are gathered here each week. We are gathered where God wishes to be found and where He, through appointed men and appointed means, forgives sins on earth. And now, the question can be answered, “How does this forgiveness work?”

If reason alone is employed to understand this repetitive forgiving of sins, reason comes up with some quite impressive notions. Forgiveness, some think, is like gas for your gas tank – it gets you ready to travel through another week. Forgiveness, others think, is a message for the mind, so that you don’t forget it through the coming week. Forgiveness, still others think, is a message for the will, “empowering” the Christian to live according to God’s law. All of these thoughts are nice. They are noble. And they are wrong. Let’s return to the Scriptures, to learn from them how this perpetual forgiving of sins on earth works.

On the cross, Jesus works forgiveness of sins for all persons of all time. This means all of your sins were forgiven on that cross. This means that you were forgiven even before you committed a single sin. And

indeed, the work of the cross is the eternal plan of God.

Therefore, God provides the forgiveness of sins before and apart from anything any sinners does, thinks, asks, or says. And God intends to accomplish this eternal forgiveness on earth at one certain place and time, once for all, on the holy cross, which forgiveness is shown to be real by the resurrection of Christ from the dead, just as the forgiveness of the paralytic in our text is shown to be real by the healing of his body. Thus, the holy cross is the place on earth where sins are forgiven; there God is set a peace with sinners. That’s how forgiveness works – it restores relationship and sets alienated people at peace. God is set at peace. This peace comes from God’s eternal decree and His once-for-all sacrifice of Good Friday. There, your peace with God is established. There it is completed.

So, forgiveness restores peace with God. God is at peace with you on account of Christ and His sacrifice of the Holy Cross. You find your peace with God, precisely because you are a sinner, in the forgiveness of your sins in church, where God wishes it to be found.