

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity  
15 October, Anno Domini 2023  
St. Matthew 9:1-8

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear forgiven of the Lord,

We have all been in those situations with people who are struggling and suffering and we want desperately to help. We want to make it better, change the situation, make their problems go away. And I would bet that if in those situations you thought about inviting your neighbor to church you've hesitated because you've thought "Well, that's not really what they need right now. They need things fixed. They need a better situation. Then maybe they can think about 'spiritual things'." We've been in that boat ourselves. We have thought "I would be okay if only this was different - if I wasn't sick with this disease; if I could make some more money; if the government was better; if I was smarter." And perhaps the cross that we are enduring has kept us from prayer, from reading the Bible, from going to church every week.

Repent. We need to call this what it is - idolatry. It is imagining that the sufferings and trials we are enduring in this life are the greatest concern that we have and that having them taken away is the greatest good that we could receive. It certainly may feel that way, but that is because our flesh is lying to us, convincing us that there is nothing worse that can happen to us than to have to endure suffering in this life. Part of the bitterness of our earthly suffering flows from the fear that we are being punished for our sins, getting what we deserve. Or, worse, it could be that we think our suffering is because God no longer cares about us or even hates us. Maybe it means our hope is in vain. We pray and groan and lament and tears flow like rivers but the affliction remains, the cancer spreads, our children still reject Christ, we still endure persecution from our family, the bills keep mounting. "What's the use? God is clearly not helping me either because I'm not good enough or He's a liar. What other explanation could there be? If God actually loves me why is He letting this happening to me? He could make it stop if He wanted."

Yes, He could. He has the power and the authority. But He loves you more than that. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts which are muddled by sin. His ways are higher than our ways which usually revolve around immediate comfort and pleasure. He knows what is good for you infinitely better than you do and even

cares about your future more than you do. And with the Blood of His Son, He has assured to you that He will do nothing to you or allow anything to befall you other than that which is absolutely best for you.

But what is good is not always pleasant. It may actually be excruciating. We know this from experience. We put ourselves through the pain of exercising in order that we might grow stronger. Muscles must be torn down in order to be strengthened. We undergo surgery to cut out diseased tissue. We discipline our children so that they don't run out into the street and get hit by a car. We understand discipline but we don't like receiving it. And who undergoing discipline wouldn't prefer to decide the terms of the discipline?

That is certainly not to say that suffering isn't suffering. Suffering can be very bitter and heavy. And we are absolutely encouraged to pray that God would either lighten our suffering or give us strength to endure it so long as He deems necessary for our good, just our Lord Jesus Christ prayed in the garden that if it were possible His Father would take the cup of the cross from Him. Through the Scriptures, God urges us with words such as "Call upon Me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you."

But earthly suffering, no matter how bitter, is not our biggest problem. Consider what Jesus did for the paralytic. It would be hard to imagine that when the paralytic's friends brought him to Jesus they were looking for forgiveness (though we can't completely rule that out). They had heard of what Jesus had done for others and desired the same for their friend. And that is certainly not bad. Compassion is good and godly and we are called to care for our neighbor's body in any way that we are able.

Yet, that is not what Jesus did for the paralytic. Jesus said to him "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." It is only our sinful ears that hear what Jesus did and scoff at it as though He had said nothing more than "I hope things get better for you." It is a callous heart that does not understand the true threats and dangers that hears that God has taken away its guilt and its eternal damnation and finds no comfort, no hope, no relief. By forgiving that man, Jesus gave him absolutely everything. He promised Him the love of the Father; He promised him the resurrection of his body and soul to eternal life where there would be perfect healing; He promised Him the peace that passes all human understanding; He promised him that every affliction will be turned to serve God's good and gracious purposes; He promised him that one day all of his enemies will lie vanquished at his feet.

Sin lies at the root of ALL, literally, all our suffering - wars, crime, divorce, disease, frustration, corruption, inflation, famine. Whether that suffering is a direct result of a specific sin or just the general destruction and death that sin has unleashed on all of creation, sin, OUR sin is the cause. The verse that we are all committing to our hearts this month, Romans 6:23, reminds us of that. "The wages of sin is death." It remains as God said to Adam regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil - "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Sin is the problem of all problems. All others are symptoms and consequences of this one - sin.

The one who sees and understands that is the one who can hear Christ's absolution and find joy and peace even though the affliction remains. That one knows that he is at peace with God and that he is not simply getting the just desserts of his sin or being deserted by God. Being forgiven means that EVERY evil that is sent against you, God will use to bless and benefit you. Being forgiven means that you no longer stand under the temporal and eternal condemnation of your sins. Being forgiven means that you can know for certain that if you are suffering, God will use that suffering to bless you. And what greater good can God bring about than to draw you closer to Himself in faith and strip you of your idols; to bring you to hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest His life-giving Word through which He strengthens you and teaches you? Dear child of God, you can truly receive all your afflictions with joy because the Lord disciplines those whom He loves. By His merciful training, your Father is putting your flesh to death, He is arming you against the assaults of the devil and the world, He is preparing you to withstand temptation and persecution, He is drawing you away from all that is harmful to you.

What greater gift could the Lord Jesus give you than all of that? And if you must suffer for a time in this life so that you might be kept for eternal life, would you not gladly do so? The future is not uncertain. You are not suffering for something you can't be sure of. Christ has promised you. He has suffered and died and gives you His Body and His Blood as a pledge of what awaits. That is your sign and promise of His faithfulness and your victory. As He has risen from the dead, body and soul, so will all who put their hope and trust in Him. At that time you will ascend far out of the reach of all suffering and pain because you will be cleansed in body and soul from all of sin's corruption. Until that time He will remain with you to care for you and protect you even when the devil is throwing everything he has against you to overthrow you.

Consider also that your suffering isn't just about you or only for your benefit. In you and through you, Christ is also working in lives of others. Through the forgiving and the healing of the paralytic, Christ not only helped the paralytic but He taught those around Him about who He was for them and that, indeed, in Him and through Him God had given the authority to men to forgive sins in His Name and by His authority. Jesus did so much more for the paralytic than simply grant him and temporary reprieve from his paralysis. Jesus gave Him the promise of eternal salvation and healing and proclaimed the same to all those there and all of those who heard the good news from the lips of those who had seen and heard. Your sufferings are not only a blessing to you, but they are a blessing to those around you as you receive them in faith and have the opportunity to share with others the hope that you have in Jesus and His absolution.

All need this good news. Your friends who are suffering need to hear this good news. That doesn't mean that you don't also help with their daily bread. But you have been given a right understanding of suffering by Holy Scripture. You understand that God uses suffering both of the body and of the conscience to draw us to Him who alone can help and deliver and save us. You understand that the suffering of the Christian is not a sign of God's anger but of His love. Like the paralytic's friends, bring your suffering friends to Jesus that He may help them, that He may give to them the deepest most abiding help possible - the forgiveness of their sins.

And in that forgiveness, take heart, be of good courage. There is no suffering or death that you cannot endure in Christ because you know that through it He is helping you in ways better than you could either desire or deserve. Sometimes suffering is the answer to your prayer that you would be delivered from evil. You don't have to understand exactly what God is doing through your suffering. Simply turn your attention all the more to His Word, to prayer, to confession and absolution, to the promises of your Baptism, to receiving the Holy Communion. Cry out to Him and know that He hears you and is working your affliction to bless you and keep you. Strive against sin so that you don't invite His wrath and suffer for rebelling against His Word. Don't suffer as an evildoer. And even if you do, rejoice that God loves you enough to teach you away from sin rather than watch you suffer for it eternally.

Dear Christian, forgiveness is everything. Every good and perfect gift from God is rooted in His forgiveness which He has obtained for you through the death and resurrection of His Son. Set your sights on this forgiveness. Let it be highest joy.

Receive it in all the ways that He gives it to you and draws others to it that they may know it's rich and abiding peace.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through Christ Jesus our Lord.