

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Trinity 19 – October 15, 2023
Matthew 9:1-8 – Carried to the Cure
Rev Peter Wagner

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

The paralytic could not bring himself to the cure. He knew where the cure was, but he couldn't get there. If only he could go to Jesus, if only the miracle worker would touch him, or look his way, or just pass close enough to touch his robe! But the paralytic could not walk, and he could not go to Jesus.

Only by the help of his four friends was the paralytic carried to the cure. And what faithful friends. A crowd in the way? No problem, they opened a hole in the roof and lowered him to Jesus' feet.

The plight of the paralytic is a picture of our own condition. By ourselves, we cannot come to Jesus. Our disease of sin renders us unable to bring ourselves to the cure. Worse than that, Ephesians 2 says, we were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once walked. We weren't paralyzed. We could walk. But we walked contrary to the will of God, we actively turned away toward sin and death. We fled from God's sight, to continue in sin.

The paralytic walked in sin too. But he did not know his condition. So when he finally came to the cure, Jesus gave him more than he bargained for. He wanted to walk, but Jesus forgave his sins. For Jesus knew that paralysis is only an affliction of this life, forgiveness would bring him eternal life, and a perfect heavenly body.

Like the paralytic, we don't know what we really need. Too often, we don't come to the house of God seeking forgiveness. We seek many things in church. A vibrant community. Good music. An uplifting message. But we fail to seek the greater gifts Jesus offers in the church: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

So Jesus caught the paralytic by surprise. He said to him, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." What a disappointment! Anyone could say that! Anyone can forgive, but nothing changes. Like when someone these days is suffering and we say we'll pray for them. More often than not, people get upset when we say this, because they think prayer is worthless.

But prayer is not worthless, and neither are the words of Jesus. The paralytic had come to the right cure. Though he felt nothing, the forgiveness Jesus spoke was real. Though he still lay helpless on his mat, he was justified before God. His sins were gone forever. Not vaporized, but transferred. Transferred to the shoulders of the miracle worker, to God the Son himself, who would soon bring those sins to the cross and suffer their consequences in his body.

The same is true for you. When you hear the pastor announce absolution, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins" – when you hear those words, they are not empty. They're not empty, but they may seem empty. You feel nothing, and life goes on. How can you know that his words are true? How can you know forgiveness is actually yours? Jesus died a long time ago, you never saw him on the cross. Why should you believe?

Thanks be to God, Jesus knows our weak faith. He knows how hard it is for us to believe. So for the paralytic, he gave him something tangible to hold onto. Something solid and obvious. He healed him, attaching visible results to the invisible forgiveness. "Rise, pick up your bed and go home." From that moment, the paralytic and everyone else knew that Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.

And in his love for you, God also gives you something solid. He attaches the promise of forgiveness to tangible, everyday things, for your sake. These are the sacraments. Water, wine, bread. God hasn't given the sacraments because he likes to invent strange rituals, but because he wants you to be confident that your sins are forgiven. He gives the sacraments so your faith is not subjective, but objective and concrete and confident.

Among the sacraments, baptism is the one that best corresponds to the healing of the paralytic. The paralyzed man was brought into the house where Jesus was through the roof, just as baptism brings you into the church, the house of God. And Jesus said to him, "Take heart, my son," just as baptism makes you sons of God.

For baptism is how God rescued you. How he carried you to the cure. It's all God's work. Pure gospel. What God does for you for Jesus' sake. God had pity on your wretched state, fleeing from his sight, walking in sin and death. He took you and made you alive as his child. He claimed you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he put in you a new heart, a heart of flesh, a receptive heart to believe in Christ and walk in righteousness and truth.

How foolish we would be if we thought baptism was a good work that we could do for God, to show our commitment to him. Not at all! Baptism is God's free gift to us, to show his commitment to us. Our works can never save, but God's works always save. Through baptism, God strips off your old sinful nature and drowns it. Then he washes you clean and clothes you with Christ and his righteousness. Baptized into Christ, you are a new creation. He has begun to restore the lost image of God to you in righteousness and holiness.

And the example of the paralytic especially teaches why we should baptize babies. For like a paralyzed man carried to the cure, babies must be carried by their parents to the font. They cannot bring themselves to God. Babies teach how utterly dependent we all are on God's work. They're literally paralyzed, they cannot walk. If I set my little girl down on the floor, she'll wiggle her cute little arms and legs nonstop, but she won't go anywhere. She's stuck. Until she learns to crawl, she's a wonderful picture of how helpless we all are to bring ourselves to God.

And babies also need what baptism offers, they need forgiveness. They need to be rescued from sin. For even babies are corrupted by sin and guilt. "In sin did my mother conceive me," says Psalm 51. Even in the womb, we were infected by original sin inherited from our parents. And as babies, we also committed actual sin. We were jealous of mom. We impatiently demanded attention. We lashed out in frustration. So for our original and actual sin, even as babies we needed forgiveness, forgiveness in the washing of Jesus.

And what's more, babies are ready for baptism, because they have the capacity for faith. We see their faith in how they trust their parents. My little girl trusts that if I leave her to wiggle on the floor, when she gets frustrated and cries, I'll have pity and come and pick her up. She trusts that I'll take care of her. She trusts that her mom will give the milk she needs. If she didn't trust us, she wouldn't cry to us for help. Her little eyes wouldn't follow us all over the room.

Really, she has more faith than I do. I don't trust God nearly so well. I get anxious and overwhelmed. I think I need to fix everything. I'm too proud to admit I'm helpless, and I don't cry to God for help.

So babies are the perfect candidates for baptism. They need the forgiveness baptism offers, they have the capacity for faith, and they gladly receive God's gifts. That's why Jesus always praised the faith of children. He said in Mark 10, "Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

And what a blessing it is this morning to have so many children, singing the faith with joy and confidence. They're doing a truly good work, confessing their love for Jesus and their need for his salvation. What an example of faith they are. And what an example of what God does through baptism. He gives the Holy Spirit, he changes hearts, so his children begin to do good works that are truly pleasing to him. Not works that earn salvation, but works of love and thanksgiving for what they've received.

And today we also rejoice and give thanks to God for our school teachers, for the love they daily show these children, and for the good work they do to train them up. God has established the office of teachers for the purpose of strengthening children in the faith, helping them grow in the gifts of baptism.

We especially rejoice today in the installation of Mrs. Borcharding. She has completed these months of study in God's word and the teachings of the church so that she will be well-equipped to teach our children rightly and carry them to Jesus. Like the faithful friends who carried the paralytic to the cure.

So take heart, baptized children of God. Your sins are forgiven. The life and salvation of God are yours. Though in this life you still commit sin, by the work of the Holy Spirit your desire is now for the things of God. And you can trust his forgiveness. As often as you return in repentance, you can be confident of his mercy. Because God has attached his forgiving word to the waters where you were baptized. And the God who carried you to himself will always bring you back. He will cleanse you for the sake of the death of his dear Son.

So hear God's comforting words to you in Isaiah 46. "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.