



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, February 19, 2006
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Mark 2:1-12

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THE REAL HEALING

Now when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven."

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

A big crowd has gathered in and around the door of the house in Capernaum where Jesus was staying. [It may well have been Peter's house.] Jesus' reputation for wondrous healings of various kinds in Capernaum and in other towns around the north shore of the Sea of Galilee has drawn many people. In today's Gospel Jesus is "preaching the word" to this gathering from within the house. We can imagine them listening intently, including those standing outside the door.

Then comes an interruption. Four men carry a paralyzed man on a pallet. When they cannot get through the crowd, they climb to the roof with him. [A typical house of that period and place would have had stairs to a flat, thatch-and-mud roof.] They open up the roof and make an opening through which they lower the paralyzed man on his pallet, placing him before Jesus. Saint Mark says, "Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.'"

I think it is safe to say this is not what the paralytic and his four helpers were expecting from Jesus. In addition, what Jesus says here causes serious conflict with his critics – scribes present, who Mark says "question in their hearts" why Jesus has so spoken; it is blasphemy; for who can forgive sins but God alone?

Jesus perceives these hostile thoughts and addresses them, "Why do you question thus in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to a paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk?' But that you may know that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins" – he said to the paralytic – "Rise, take up your pallet and go home." And so the paralytic did, to the amazement of all.

Although only God can forgive sins, to say, "My Son, your sins are forgiven," seems easier than telling the paralytic to rise and walk, because of the immediate evidence. Jesus verifies his divine authority to forgive sins by healing the sick man.

Why in this story does Jesus first respond to the sick man's faithful request (expressed through his presence and the intercession of his helpers) by saying, "Your sins are forgiven"? Why doesn't Jesus begin by giving the sick man what he obviously wants and needs? Is it that there is some unseen direct link between the sick man's sins and his paralysis? While this suggestion may naturally arise from the narrative and from the way people thought and still think, it goes nowhere deep enough. And if it is correct, especially in the minds of fellow sinners, then the suggestion may be merely the cruel means of condemning a sick person.

"Sin" is the biblical term for our separation from God. Sin is not a sick man's particular problem. Sin is a universal predicament. Our alienation from God, the source of life and truth and goodness, is the source not just of illness, but of all our problems. Sin's final accomplishment is death.

Jesus came to give us life by re-establishing our connection and fellowship with God. There are many different ways of saying "sin" and "forgiveness of sins," but all together that is the basic human problem Jesus came to address and to claim the authority to address – by virtue of his own unique relation to God, his Sonship.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus initially disappoints his petitioners and offends his critics by delaying a healing and instead draws attention to our deepest need and his capacity to fulfill that need. Otherwise, we would have nothing more than the story of a remarkable miracle. The point is that Jesus today does a miracle which is seen in order to show the importance of the healing which is not seen and which we all desperately need. Sin is indeed as paralyzing to the mind and heart as is physical paralysis to the body, whether or not there is any direct linkage whatsoever between them.

Our separation from God is a condition we all know, feel and experience. Healing it is an urgent, universal need. If we respond as Jesus' critics did, we are left untouched, as we are, taking home the baggage we brought with us; still acting out our condition in manifold ways – usually destructive modes of self-affirmation and defensiveness, often at the cost of hurting others.

If, however, we receive Jesus' word in the openness of faith, healing occurs. Sins are forgiven because the forgiveness is received, and the relationship with God enjoyed by his only Son is ours as a gift. We go home without the old burdens, graced with genuine release and a new lease on life.

Saint Mark's picture of Capernaum this morning is a picture of the Church of Jesus ever since. Everything the ministry of the Church does is ordained to put forward what happened by the Sea of Galilee in that town – the healing of the breach between us and God, and therefore also amongst ourselves. Think of all the characters present in today's Gospel. Jesus and his apostles. The great number of people gathered to hear Jesus preach the word (and, perhaps, to see some sign or wonder performed). Curiosity seekers as well as seekers after God. Critics and skeptics too. The sick man and his helpers, coming to Jesus with their faith and prayers. Can we see ourselves in each of them? There may, there may not be, in that time and place, the miracle and sign they all seek in the Church of Jesus.

But one thing they will hear and receive, and that is the most important of all. "My Child, your sins are forgiven." And then there is Holy Communion, which, if you think at all about it, is the outward, visible sign of the healing of the breach.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.