

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 14, 2021  
“Your Sins are Forgiven” (Mark 2:1-12)

He was a pitiful sight, and he knew it. All day long, day after day, he could do nothing but lie there on that old, worn out, smelly mat of his. That gave him plenty of time to think. All day long, day after day, he replayed his life in his mind; for his mind, you see, was really the only thing he had left. His body was nothing more than a limp dishrag, long past being useful to him or anyone else. But his mind was filled with pictures – images from his past. It kept rehearsing those images of all that had been wrong about his life. It kept reliving all those times he had failed. The more he scanned those images, the more he saw all that was wrong, evil, and rotten.

His life history became more grotesque with each rehearsal. But the clue for his present situation must be contained somewhere in those scenes. They must hold the key as to why he had been stricken. It was his fault; his own sin that had caused it. He was increasingly convinced of that. Among those pictures from the past was surely the one deed that had provoked God’s wrath upon him. Surely there was something for which the Almighty was now punishing him. Why else would he be so utterly helpless? Why else would the parts of his body have become like foreign appendages, forcing him to rely on the care and compassion of others? He must have done something terribly wrong!

This way of thinking was prevalent in the society this man lived. To the Jews, a sick man was a man with whom God was angry. A man plagued with sickness or disability or trouble was getting what he deserved because he had sinned against God. And this paralytic – one of the characters in today’s gospel – bought into that notion, as well. He had certainly brought this infirmity on himself.

I wonder just how ancient this way of thinking is. And when bad things happen to us today, do we, like the paralytic, feel that we’ve committed a sin against God – one so terrible that God is punishing us? If we, too, buy into this way of thinking, then we need to pay attention to the rest of this story. Let’s begin on the day Jesus came to town.

The paralytic lay there on his mat, just as he had for so many days. The physical condition of his body brought him much misery, but his mental anguish was even more severe. He knew he would live like this for the rest of his life, and it was his own fault. Could he ever stop those pictures that tormented him?

When he opened his eyes, he saw that they had come to him yet again – those persistent friends of his who were less able to accept his condition than he was. They wanted to take him to see another self-proclaimed healer. He knew their intentions were good, but there had been so many of these so-called healers; so many who had prayed over him, touched him, anointed him.

It was all so futile. There was nothing that could undo the damage he’d done to himself. How could he make them accept the fact that he was being punished by God? How could he make them understand there was nothing they could do? How could he convince them to give up their fruitless efforts to find someone who could heal him?

As they laced his smelly mat with ropes, I can almost hear him protesting: *No more healers, please!* But his friends were persistent. They gently picked him up and made their way out into the streets. As they walked, they explained the reason for their hope this time. Jesus had returned. This fascinating, but strange, resident of the village had made his way back. And he returned with his newly won reputation of being able to do all sorts of marvelous healings in the name of God. This Jesus was the talk of the village, and these friends were hopeful that he was the one who would finally restore their friend.

As he was carried along, staring at the blue Galilean sky above him, he knew it was not true, or at least would not be true in his case. No healer from God could undo that dreadful past of his that had sent him into paralysis. No healer could stop the wrath of God; most certainly not this carpenter-turned-preacher.

When they rounded the corner onto the street of the house where Jesus was teaching, his friends came to an abrupt halt. Perhaps they'd finally come to their senses and would just carry him back to where they found him. *Look at that crowd*, one said. *We'll never get through that mob*. The entire street in front of the house was crammed with people, each one pressing forward to see and hear this favorite son who had returned.

For an instant, he sensed that this little company of friends had become discouraged and would simply give up and walk away. But then another said, *I have an idea. Let's go this way*. And the others obediently fell in line. They'd come this far; anything was worth a try.

Soon he found himself being hoisted up to the rooftop of the house where the crowd was gathered. The grunts and groans of his friends paid off as, finally, he was brought safely to the flat roof of the house. *Now what?* he wondered. Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw his friends tugging at a section of the roof, peeling it off like one might remove the skin from a piece of fruit.

Unconcerned by the stares of those inside the house, they shoved him and his mat over to the newly made hole and, with the use of ropes, began letting him down into the midst of the crowd. A hush fell over the room as he was slowly lowered to the floor. Looking up through the opening in the roof, he could see the smiling, reassuring faces of his friends. *How silly we all must look!* he thought. But his friends didn't seem to care; not if it meant seeing their dear friend restored to health.

As he looked out at the faces in the crowd, one that was familiar came into focus – the face of Jesus. He was older than when the man had last seen him, the lines in his face deeper, and the beard longer than he remembered; but his eyes were still warm and gentle, now penetrating him mysteriously. Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Jesus' words broke the silence: *Son, your sins are forgiven*.

*How did he know? How could he tell? Had Jesus, too, seen the images from his past? Those dreadful pictures that preoccupied his mind everyday?* What Jesus did know was that this man's lack of power over his body was nothing compared with his lack of power to undo his past.

And the first thing Jesus did was to free him from his guilt and refute the notion that his condition was the consequence of sin. Jesus was essentially saying, *Child, God is not angry with you. Everything is alright.*

Whatever the source of Jesus' knowledge, those words seemed to ignite a warmth in the man's chest. The burden of his guilt, along with the terror and estrangement he felt from God immediately rolled from his heart. The warmth then moved steadily through his body, stretching out to his fingertips, then down to his toes. *Could it be?* he wondered. *After all these years? Yes! He could feel, but could he move? Yes, yes he could.*

As he was becoming reacquainted with sensations he had not felt for a long time, he was only vaguely aware that tension had filled the room. Jesus had perceived that the scribes sitting there were questioning his authority to forgive sins. They believed that only God could forgive sins. For any *man* to claim to do so was an insult to God. It was blasphemy! So Jesus challenged them on this belief. *You say I have no right to forgive sins? Well, listen up. You believe that this man is sick because he is a sinner and cannot be cured until he is forgiven. Well, watch this.* Jesus once again addressed the man on the mat. This time it was not a gently word of forgiveness to break him away from his past, but a forceful command to send him into a brand new future. *I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.*

Now, it was one thing to wiggle a toe, or lift a hand. It was another to stand up. But the tone of the command left him no choice. The crowd was silenced, the controversy hushed. He felt the gaze of the entire group watching to see what he might or might not do. Moving slowly at first, not at all sure he could do it, he sat up. Then, trembling with both fear and excitement, he moved his legs underneath him and stood up. He was cured. And that event demonstrated to the scribes that because he was cured, he was also forgiven. Therefore, Jesus' claim to forgive sins must be true.

Without as much as a pause, the man reached down, lifted the mat under his arm, and began making his way out of the house. The crowd was amazed, and immediately began to glorify God because of what they had witnessed. His friends – the ones who had kept on believing even after he had given up – met him outside the house with uncontrolled roars of laughter and joy. What a celebration it must have been!

But the celebration was not just that the man could now walk. To him, it was a celebration of God's amazing grace to forgive his sins. Jesus' words to him as he had lain there helpless on his mat were words he would never forget. They weren't just words forgiving him of something he had done, but words forgiving him of who he had become. Jesus' words told him that his paralysis was not the result of some divine punishment. True, some mysterious illness *had* imprisoned his body. The paralysis was proof of that. But he had become a self-imposed prisoner of his own guilt

*Son, your sins are forgiven.* Jesus' words had forgiven him the guilt that had strapped him to a mat of self-blame. They had freed him to be the person God created him to be.

This story certainly goes to the heart of how Jesus approached the needs of the people he encountered. Throughout the gospels, we see his concern for human sickness and suffering. How often do we read the phrase, *He had compassion for them?* However, this morning's even leaves no question that Jesus primary concern was the spiritual needs of the people; not that their physical needs were unimportant. It was a matter of which came first. What good would it have been for Jesus to heal this man's legs if he didn't know where he should walk or why he should walk there?

Christ offers us this same forgiveness. There are things in our past, too, that haunt us daily. Sometimes we just can't move past them. We carry around shame and regret every day of our lives, replaying in our minds those poor choices or moments of indiscretion, those times we were weak and gave into temptation. We feel that our sins are so great that we are unworthy of anyone's love or affection – especially God's. When trouble or heartache comes along, we're convinced that the ghost from our past is the reason. We come to believe that we don't deserve a good life – or even to be happy – so we allow ourselves to become prisoners of our sin. And that's no way to live. It's certainly not how God wants us to live, or created us to live. He wants to unburden our hearts and allow us the freedom to live in a loving relationship with him and with others.

So Christ comes to us, just as he did to the paralytic: *Child, God is not angry with you. Lay down your burden. Come to me and do not be afraid.* Until we can accept God's grace and forgiveness and, in turn, be able to forgive ourselves, we're not truly living; only existing. Christ comes today and every day to heal our troubled spirits and to reconcile us with God. With this new-found freedom and reassurance that we are forgiven children of God, we, too, can take up our mats and go home. And where is home? Home is living each and every day in the grace and love of our God. Amen.