

## The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

Matthew 9:1-8

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Please be patient with me today. I'm going to lay a little groundwork before we get to what Jesus is talking about with the paralytic. I'm sure many of you know the name Charles Finney. He was a Presbyterian pastor who lived from 1792 to 1875. He is the father of what we call revivalism. You may have heard of the second great awakening which took place from 1790 to 1840. This is where revivalism started and flourished. If you're paying attention to dates, you'll realize that the second great awakening started while Finney was 3. Even though it started when he was an infant, Finney is really the key figure of this movement because of his dynamic preaching and charismatic personality. There is absolutely nothing Lutheran, or Biblical for that matter, about revivalism but it is in the very water that most Protestants drink. So why bring it up?

We are Lutherans. Some might say we are proud Lutherans! And that is okay. After all, we have pure doctrine that teaches what the Bible teaches. That may sound arrogant to our ears, but it sure didn't to the Lutheran reformers. They were willing to die for such pure doctrine! We have the amazing Law & Gospel distinction through which the Scriptures actually make sense. We have the proper appreciation for the Sacraments mandated by Jesus where He promises to give us His grace through faith alone! We have the Small Catechism which not only teaches the fullness of the Faith in such a simple straightforward manner, but is the only catechism that can be prayed and used in daily life!

Unlike the NBA players, we don't live in a bubble. We are Lutherans in the United States. We live in the midst of a Christian culture dominated by revivalism. Unfortunately some of that revivalistic thinking creeps into our Lutheran circles. It's even infected Grace Lutheran Church! It spreads mostly through music.

Every time I see a Roman Catholic church singing a Lutheran hymn, I chuckle, and then think to myself, “keep on singing that glorious doctrine!” The more you sing it, the more it will change you! Sadly, revivalistic hymns made it into LCMS hymnals with the first English LCMS hymnal. They weren’t quite ready for the switch from German to English and pulled English hymns from the American culture around them. Sadly we still have some of those hymns in our current hymnal. LSB 461, “I Know That My Redeemer Lives” is a good example of this. I know many of you may love that hymn. But that doesn’t make it a hymn worth loving! I know you love the little white hymnal in the pews! But, unfortunately, they are crammed full of revivalist hymns with bad doctrine. Loving hymns don’t make them worth loving. Like eating our veggies which are good for us, we have to learn to love great hymns that are good for us. Hymns teach. Even more so than liturgy or preaching, hymns teach. Music has a way of getting down into your heart. Revivalist hymns teach trust in emotions and decisions. Lutheran hymns teach grace by faith alone for the sake of Christ alone. That’s why it’s so important what we sing. I’m not just speaking as a stodgy old Lutheran. I actually grew up in revivalism and came out of that into the pure refreshing doctrine and hymns of Lutheranism. My opinion in this matter might be worth something. I might be able to see revivalism where a lifelong Lutheran might not.

So what is revivalism? The two main features of Revivalism are emotional manipulation and decision theology. Revival preachers use dynamic music and dynamic preaching to whip you up into an emotional fervor so you make decisions. They equate Christianity with external behavior and reduce the teachings of Jesus to nothing but simple morality. It basically becomes nothing but decisions you make to live a better life, starting with the unBiblical decision to accept Jesus into your heart. The problem becomes that you put your trust into your emotions and external behavior. The proof of your faith changes from the external Word and Sacraments applied to you, including Holy Absolution, into your emotions and external behavior. You judge church on how it moved you emotionally instead of whether or not God acted upon you there.

Maybe this is one reason our churches are so empty. I can get emotionally charged outside of church!

Besides the deviation from Scripture, the problem with revivalism is that emotions are unreliable in the best of times and external behavior is sketchy at best. Even internal behavior is shoddy but most people don't see it! Where's the comfort of the Gospel?

Let's look at today's fascinating Gospel. Jesus is back in His hometown Capernaum. He's in His house and so many people are there to see Him, that they're spilling out the front door. Four friends bring a paralytic to Jesus, but they can't get through the crowd. We know from the accounts in Mark and Luke that they actually had to make a hole in the roof to lower their paralytic friend down in front of Jesus. Each account points out that Jesus sees their faith. We'll come back to that.

Jesus says something very interesting. He doesn't immediately heal the paralytic. He says, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." (v. 2) First Jesus says "take heart." It's like he said, "have courage!" This isn't an empty platitude. I don't know if you remember that horrible Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." Talk about empty platitudes! There are plenty of times in life where you suffer from real problems and real dangers. If you get diagnosed with terminal cancer, do you really want to hear: "Don't worry, be happy?" Be happy about what? If you get a phone call that your spouse you've spent a lifetime building a life with has died in a tragic accident, do you really want to hear, "Don't worry, be happy?" Be happy about what? What you need isn't happiness but courage. Courage acknowledges that you have real problems but you must face them. This paralytic had real problems. Especially in a time before any kind of accommodations for those who struggle with handicaps. Jesus says, Take heart! But then He announces why we actually can take heart or have courage: "your sins are forgiven!"

We suffer in this life because of sin. The sin of man has wrecked the world and it wrecks your life. If there's no solution for sin, we have no reason to take heart or have courage.

But Jesus says, “Take heart, your sins are forgiven.” The evil scribes are right in that only God can forgive sins. They think Jesus is blaspheming because He says, “your sins are forgiven.” They are actually the ones blaspheming because they don’t recognize Jesus as God. God is the only one that can solve our sin problem.

If I sin against you, I might be able to atone for it. Might! But how can I atone for my sin against God who created me? I cannot! God Himself must come down from heaven and take on human flesh and die in my place! Sin must have a blood sacrifice to atone for it!

Have you ever thought about all the blood that poured from the temple in the Old Testament? When Solomon dedicated the temple he offered 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep! Rivers of blood! This pointed to the ultimate blood sacrifice. Jesus on the cross paying for all your sin. When the soldier pierced the side of Jesus, blood flowed out from the side of God onto the very earth He created! But because Jesus is God, all sin is atoned for. He has the authority to say, “Take heart, your sin is forgiven.” He shows that He has the authority to do this: “Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” (v. 6)

The crowd has an incredible reaction. The fear and glorifying of God aren’t surprising. We would do the same. But the text says they reacted this way because “[God] had given such authority to men.” Not to “a Man” but “to men!” Jesus shows us this isn’t an overreaction or misunderstanding. He visits His disciples after He was risen from the dead:

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:21–23)

Jesus says that when I or Pastor Holm pronounce forgiveness of sins in His stead and with His authority it actually happens! Your sins are forgiven. Jesus says that when Fathers pronounce the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to their family it actually happens! Their sins are forgiven! Jesus says that when you pronounce forgiveness to your neighbor who is struggling with their sin, it actually happens! Their sins are forgiven!

That pronouncement is what you're supposed to put your trust in. Jesus paid for the sin of the world on the cross. But you and I cannot go to the cross! It was about 2,000 years ago! The work of the cross must come to you through the means that Jesus has established which are Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. You can put your trust in these things because Jesus has attached His promise to them.

Will you have an emotional reaction to these precious gifts of God? I surely hope so. If you owed a million dollars to the bank and then they come to you one day and announce that your debt is forgiven, wouldn't you have an emotional reaction? That's a rhetorical question, by the way! The problem isn't the emotional response to God's grace but putting your trust in the emotional reaction instead of the reason for the emotional reaction! This is what revivalists do and it's since it's in the air we breathe, we are tempted to do the same. How so?

Let's look at a couple of questions.

First, let's consider what the marks of the church are. Marks are a way of saying, what are the distinguishing characteristics of the church. We confess that the marks of the church are the Gospel purely taught and the Sacraments administered correctly. (AC VII) The marks of the church for the Revivalist are emotion and experience. Let's look at how a Revivalist and a Lutheran answer some basic questions:

How was church today?

Where do you look for your answer?

The revivalist might say something like, “The music really stirred my soul!”

The revivalist also might say something like, “I felt so moved today!”

The Revivalist might also say something like “Pastor’s sermon really touched my heart today!”

The Lutheran says something like this, “God forgave my sins today in Holy Absolution and His Supper!”

It’s not that having your emotions stirred or feeling moved or being touched by the sermon are, in and of themselves bad. But if that’s what you look at to determine how church went, you’ll be disappointed most of the time. Even when your emotions aren’t stirred, God forgave your sins in the Holy Absolution. Even when you don’t feel moved, God forgave your sins and strengthened your faith in the holy absolution. Even when the sermon isn’t particularly touching, God still spoke to you through His Word.

Here’s another question.

Are you sure of your salvation?

Where do you look for the answer?

A revivalist might say something like “My faith feels strong today!”

And a Revivlaist might also say something like “I’m living right!”

A Lutheran says something like “I’m baptized!” or “I had the Lord’s Supper!”

Again, having strong faith and having good works aren’t bad, in and of themselves. Putting your trust in these things is the problem. Whether your faith feels strong or weak, the object of your faith, Jesus, is always strong! Whether you’ve done pretty good today or just had a horrible day where you didn’t keep your temper and didn’t get anything accomplished, Jesus has done everything already for your salvation.

You will have emotions and your faith will show forth in good works just like the faith of the four friends. Jesus says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) These are good things, but they aren’t things you can trust in. If you put your trust in your emotions or your works, they will fail you. But you can trust in Jesus.

Think about your deathbed. Will “Don’t worry, be happy” really work for you? Will emotions and good works really comfort you? They fall away empty. Jesus, however, gives real comfort. He does this in His Word and His Sacraments.

And Jesus says to you today, “Take heart, my child, your sins are forgiven.”

These are words you can live by. In good times and bad times. In emotional highs and emotional lows. In rich times or poor times. In security or calamity.

“Take heart, your sins are forgiven!”

In Jesus’ name. Amen.