

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity  
Matthew 9:1—8

Satan wants to keep you crippled in your sin.

This is how you start out in the womb... crippled with sin. You are so crippled with sin; you're born an enemy of God and want nothing to do with Him. This is how our confessions put it:

<sup>1</sup> Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam [Romans 5:12], all who are naturally born are born with sin [Psalm 51:5], that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence. <sup>2</sup> Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit [John 3:5].

This is a hard saying. This means babies who die apart from Baptism die eternally damned. This is how crippled we are. And the devil would love for you to be offended by original sin. Many get so offended by this they turn away from Christianity. And I think we mainly get offended by it because we want to believe there is something truly good in us. I'm sure you remember when the rich young ruler came to Jesus asking what he must do to be saved. Jesus hits the young man where his idol was: his possessions and income. You'll recall the rich young man goes away sad. And then Jesus says, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:24-25) The crowd is astonished. Certainly, this young man is worthy of eternal life. He's been blessed by God and he's a pillar in the community. They marvel and say, "Then who can be saved?" (Lk 18:26) Jesus replies, "What is impossible with man is possible with God." (Lk 18:27) First note that Jesus is saying it is impossible for us to save ourselves. It is impossible because of how crippled we are with original sin. Dead man cannot raise themselves from the dead. And they certainly cannot make decisions!

And this is why Jesus coming into the flesh is such Good News! What we cannot do, He came to do for us! His very name means YAHWEH saves! Jesus saves those dead in their trespasses and sins.

This is why the crowds are following Jesus. He's the bearer of Good News. In the Mark and Luke accounts of the same miracle in our Gospel reading today, the crowd listening to Jesus is so large that they block the doorway of the house where Jesus is teaching. The four friends have to lower their paralytic friend down through the roof. Can you imagine their surprise when Jesus says, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." (v. 2) They obviously want him healed. The friends are focused on the here and now problem and not the eternal problem. The here and now problem is an indication of the eternal problem. This paralytic is paralytic because of sin. It's sinful to try and find a particular sin the paralytic did that led to his condition because there may not be one. And we aren't his judge. But we cannot ignore that problems like this happen because of sin. People and animals get sick and die because of sin in the world. We live in a broken world that is paying the price for our sin. The proper response when someone says they feel like they're dying is "Yes, you're right, you are dying!" The solution to dying is not medicine or getting better. It's the forgiveness of sins. Jesus looks past the paralytic's immediate problem and solves his eternal problem. Satan would love for you to be focused on your immediate problems and forget or remain in ignorance of your eternal problem. It's not that immediate problems in our lives aren't important or that Jesus doesn't care about them. But Jesus wants you to live courageously in the midst of your immediate problems because you know that your eternal problem is taken care of. The paralytic man is healed by Jesus. But you know what? That paralytic man still died. He still had the eternal problem looming in his life. But thanks be to God, his eternal problem is taken care of! By healing the paralytic man, Jesus shows the scribes who were grumbling and us that He has the authority to forgive sins. He earned that authority with His perfect life and by submitting Himself to death on a cross for our benefit.

The crowds feared and glorified God because God had given the authority to forgive sins to men. Christ shares His authority to forgive sins with men. It's interesting to note that authority can be shared but not power. We cannot have the power of Christ, but we can share in His authority. And this is another area where Satan wants you to be offended and crippled.

After His resurrection, Jesus visited the apostles when they were shut in the upper room and breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold the forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:22-23) We call this the office of the keys. In my office as your pastor, I have the authority to forgive sins and withhold forgiveness. This is not my own authority, but the authority that Christ bestows on me so that the kingdom of heaven might be extended in Rialto, California. This offends a lot of people. Maybe even some of you. Satan would love for it to be a stumbling block for you. So much so that you leave the church and quit receiving God's grace. Or you might understand my authority to forgive sin, but not my authority to retain sin. I mean why would I retain sin? Have you ever seen or read a sports figure's apology? They're sorry they got caught. Or they're sorry you got offended by their behavior. But are they actually sorry for whatever sin they did? It sure doesn't seem like it in a lot of cases! Or what if someone says they're sorry for extramarital sex, but they keep on doing it? Are they really sorry? Am I to make a mockery of God's forgiveness? What was Paul's admonition to the Corinthian congregation about the young man sleeping with his mother-in-law? Throw the young man out of the congregation! Paul wanted the consequence of his sin drive him to repentance.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. You don't have to clean yourself up before you receive forgiveness. In fact, you cannot clean yourself up. The forgiveness of sins is what cleans you up. Your debt that you owe God because of your sin is cleared as far as the east is to the west and you no longer have to carry that load around. Satan will tempt you to keep carrying that guilt around or for you to stumble in the same sin.

This is the beauty of private confession and absolution. Private absolution is a word of forgiveness for your particular sin. We don't fall into the trap of the Roman Catholic church thinking that we have to enumerate every single sin to the pastor. That's impossible! But we also shouldn't throw out private confession and absolution like so many in the Lutheran church do. Listen to how our confessions talk about the Office of the Keys administered in private confession and absolution:

<sup>39</sup> The Power of the Keys administers and presents the Gospel through Absolution, which is the true voice of the Gospel. We also include Absolution when we speak of faith, because "faith comes from hearing," as Paul says in Romans 10:17. When the Gospel is heard and the Absolution is heard, the conscience is encouraged and receives comfort. <sup>40</sup> Because God truly brings a person to life through the Word, the Keys truly forgive sins before God. According to Luke 10:16, "The one who hears you hears Me." Therefore, the voice of the one absolving must be believed no differently than we would believe a voice from heaven. (Ap XIIA)

Corporate confession and absolution that we do before the Divine Service came about because people resented the authority given to pastors in their office. Let us recover the salutary use of private confession and absolution just as we cherish corporate confession and absolution.

This authority of Jesus' in the forgiveness of sins is also extended to all Christians in their private lives. Fathers, especially, should be exercising this authority frequently. Part of the mutual consolation of the brotherhood is speaking God's grace to each other. Law and Gospel applies in this as well. And this is an art rather than science! Two of C.F.W. Walther's thesis on Law and Gospel are helpful for us. This book was put together from talks Walther gave with about to be pastors. He was trying to teach them how to provide pastoral care. It's useful for all of us to be familiar with it.

Thesis VIII—You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you preach the Law to those who are already in terror on

account of their sins or the Gospel to those who are living securely in their sins.

Thesis IX—You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you point sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law toward their own prayers and struggles with God and tell them that they have to work their way into a state of grace. That is, do not tell them to keep on praying and struggling until they would feel that God has received them into grace. Rather, point them toward the Word and the Sacraments.

Thesis X—You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you preach that “dead” faith can justify and save in the sight of God—while that believer is still living in mortal sins. In the same way, do not preach that faith justifies and saves those unrepentant people because of the love and renewal it produces in them.

By preaching here, Walther really means your dialogue with people. When someone is beat up by the law of God and feels the terror of judgment, you point them to the only solace available. When Walther says Word and Sacraments here, he is really talking about the Word of forgiveness that you have the authority to pronounce and the sacraments which are tangible proofs that God has forgiven you! On the other hand, when someone is living in mortal sins, you don't point them to grace but to the law. The worst thing you can say to someone rebelliously caught up in mortal sin is, “that's okay, you're forgiven.” This is not easy to do, but it is the work that we are called to do in Christ. We are His ambassadors. You speak His Word because you want others to know the absolute freedom you have in the forgiveness of sins through faith!

Satan wants to keep you crippled in your sin. He wants you indignant at God over original sin, so you don't do anything about it.

He wants you focused on only the immediacy of life and not the eternal things that truly matter. He wants you offended that a pastor has the authority to forgive your sins.

Do not allow Satan to leave you crippled in your sin. "Take heart, your sin is forgiven!"