



Proper 7, Year B – February 22, 2009

Mark 2:1 -12

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

Which is easier to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven" or to say "Stand up and take your mat and walk."

In the context of Mark's Gospel this morning, Jesus poses that question in response to the scribes who believe that Jesus is assuming a power reserved only to God, the power to forgive sins. The assumption behind the question is natural enough: It is more difficult to tell a paralytic to walk than to say, "Your sins are forgiven." And then to show that, indeed, he might pronounce the forgiveness of sins, Jesus tells the paralytic to stand up, take his mat and go home. And the paralytic stands up, takes his mat, and goes out. The implication is clear: If then Jesus can heal the paralytic, he may also do the supposedly less difficult task of saying his sins are forgiven. Point, set, and match to Jesus.

And the point of the story is twofold: Jesus is divine, acting with God's authority to forgive sins. And even more to the point: God is a forgiving God.

So we pray, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And there, as they say, is the rub. As we forgive those who trespass against us.

Let us paraphrase Jesus's question in the context of our lives today: Which is easier to say, "You are forgiven" or "Your illness is healed."

Often, we might consider it easier to command a miraculous healing than to forgive someone a wrong they have done to us. For example, I must confess that I have yet to forgive the person in the car in front of me on 5th street, idling at a green light, texting away on their cell phone, ignoring that the light was green, and causing me to miss the light.

But, of course, that is a trivial example. Though at the time, it did seem unforgivable.

But what about the dear friend that betrayed us, our drunken child who totaled our new BMW, the doctor that misdiagnosed our mother's cancer, the vandals that burned our altar book.

Does willingness to forgive come easily? Not always. It may take years of prayer and counseling and reflection to reach a place where we can sincerely and fully forgive a particularly devastating wrong, to forgo a rightful claim against the person who harmed us.

And as if it were not difficult enough to proffer forgiveness, we encounter the reality that sometimes we do not want to be forgiven. Because if we accept forgiveness, we are admitting that we did something wrong. That we have sinned. Implicit in forgiving is a blaming of the perpetrator and a condemnation of the wrongful act. Are we always so anxious to take the blame? To call things as they are? To admit that what we did was wrong?

True, complete forgiveness is an honest and mutual action of both the perpetrator and the victim, if you will forgive the language of *Law and Order* and *CSI*. As forgiving as we might be, our willingness to forgive may be met by denial, defensiveness, or avoidance. "It wasn't my fault. I never intended to hurt you. I'm sorry you felt hurt."

Without an acknowledgement of fault and a naming of the wrongful act, the process of forgiveness is incomplete. The debt must be defined and responsibility placed before true forgiveness can take place.

Does this mean we refuse to forgive even in the face of an unrepentant perpetrator? No. Our anger and resentments and lust for revenge or retribution must be cast aside. . We must take the first step as God takes the first step with us. If nothing else, we are reminding the wrongdoer that they are responsible for committing a wrongful and harmful act. Thus, our willingness to forgive opens the door to repentance. And, perhaps, we, at least, feel better - not in itself a reason to forgive, but a fringe benefit not to be discounted. Our willingness to forgive must imagine God's willingness to forgive us and all sinners, without exception.

Then we must hope and pray for the time when fault is acknowledged and the hurtful act condemned. Because then we will move toward the shared experience of complete forgiveness.

None of this is necessarily easy. Forgiving others. Condemning wrongs. Taking blame. Forgiving ourselves. But we must never forget that God is a forgiving God. Nothing could more roundly buoy our efforts to forgive without exception. And equally without exception to acknowledge our own misdeeds. So let us turn toward the season of Lent, a time of reflection and repentance, that begins on Wednesday, with a renewed focus on God's unrelenting desire to forgive. Let us be as confident as the paralytic crashing through the roof, that we are loved by a God who stands ready to forgive any and every sin. The same God who in the person of Jesus Christ with bits and clumps of roof crashing all around him, crowds pressing from every corner, and scribes questioning him at every turn, still did not hesitate to say

"Take up your mat and walk. Your illness is healed" and by the way, "Your sins are forgiven."

Amen