19th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1967

Rev. Carl F. Thrun

IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 9: 5 For which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Rise and walk?"

ARISE AND WALK

Let me ask the question again: Which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven," or to say, "Rise and walk?" There is not much question, really, is there? Of course it is easier to say, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN, than to say, RISE AND WALK, if in the saying more than the sound of words is conveyed and something is supposed to happen. The Church declares it every Sunday in a hundred thousand churches Sunday after Sunday: YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN. But in how many churches is a paralytic given strength to rise and walk Sunday after Sunday? The question, WHICH IS EASIER, seems to answer itself.

The healing of this paralytic br~~ought to Jesus by his friends~~ throws into dramatic contrast our Lord's attitude toward the world's need and our own. Looking at this unfortunate man before Him, Christ addressed Himself first to the hopeless emptiness in the man's eyes, rather than to his obvious physical distress of not being able to walk. TAKE HEART, MY SON, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN. Only afterward did he turn his attention to this man's physical distress, RISE, TAKE UP YOUR BED AND GO HOME!

This little incident contains the very essence of our Lord's approach to the world's need -- to your need and mine. I do not want in any way to minimize our Lord's concern for the material and physical need of mankind. Jesus was abundantly concerned with the plight of human suffering. HE TOOK COMPASSION ON THEM is a common expression in the Gospels. And yet there can be little question that His primary concern was spiritual - and by that I do not mean otherworldly, divorced from the material and physical needs of mankind. I mean rather that in His eyes the two were always linked together - the physical being the outward expression of the spiritual. And so although it may appear that His primary concern was to save souls and only incidentally bodies, actually HIS CONCERN WAS WITH both. But there was not much point in grafting skin over an ulcer. There was not much to be gained, for example, in healing this man's paralysis if thenceforth he was to

walk around on sound legs but with emptiness in his eyes and a vacuum in his soul — not knowing where he should walk or why.

Now in contrast, you and I and the rest of us in our world have gone ahead on quite the opposite assumption. We have taken for granted that the basic problem is not the soul's distress but rather the needs of the body. Although it may be easier to say, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN, WE HAVE APPLIED OURSELVES WITH NO LITTLE SUCCESS TO WHAT IS APPARENTLY FAR MORE DIFFICULT * Saying to men: ARISE AND WALK.

And what tremendous strides we have taken in attacking the apparently more difficult part of the question. We have dotted the country with hospitals and provided health services for the poor so that the death rate per thousand has dropped better than 5% in the past 25 years. With every passing year you have more mornings in your lifetime when you will ARISE AND WALK than did your father or grandfather.... Or comes a sudden disaster - a flood in Mexico, a hurricane in Texas - and not only does the RED CROSS spring into action but all the country's resources are brought to bear to alleviate the suffering. A drunken derelict falls under the wheels of an automobile and we don't wait on the chance that a Good Samaritan may pass by and offer help — an ambulance is on the spot in a matter of minutes to whisk the unfortunate to the hospital to enable him to RISE AND WALK, even if only to the corner bar again..... The items could go on - housing developments, blood banks, social security, medicare, cerebral palsy, heart, and cancer funds. All testify eloquently to our concern that every man shall be able to RISE AND WALK.

At this material level of our need the picture is bright and getting constantly better. We have learned to say with astonishing ease, ARISE AND WALK. And yet for all of that we find that in this enlightened and physically comfortable year of our Lord - 1967 - the EYES OF MEN are frightenly empty and fearful, and their SOULS are hallow and barren. No one seems to know what to do about the race question, open housing or human rights, or the Vietnam crisis, or the school crisis, or the hippies, or organized crime, or grafting politicians — we could go on and on. The VACUUM IN MEN'S SOULS comes to the fore in numerous ways. Although our

physical health is constantly improving, our mental health is showing apparent deterioration - marital problems, divorces, rebellious children, teen-age delinquency, dope addiction, alcoholism, sex deviates - you name them for yourselves! They all combine to produce as smelly a mess as anyone would ever care to have put under his nose. The plight of freedom in the world rests precariously upon the shoulders of a country which is jittery and unsure of itself - the health of whose character is hardly robust.

Our bodies have never been more comfortable in the easiest of chairs and the softest of mattresses - but our minds are restless and fearful, and our souls are frighteningly empty. We live longer than ever before - but we are not sure any longer for what purpose we live. When a sensitive and intelligent young woman comes to me and asks in all seriousness whether it is right to bring a child into a world like ours - you begin to recognize the depth of the emptiness which has swept like the black plague through the hearts of people.

We try to escape and forget our soul-sickness by running off to the movies - or a party - or watching T.V. - or stopping for a couple of beers on the way home from work. WHICH IS EASIER TO SAY, "ARISE AND WALK", OR TO SAY, "YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN?" And what relevance does the word SIN have for this soul-sickness that keeps dogging our steps in spite of comfort, and ease, and long life?

Looking beyond its more obvious expressions, is not SIN essentially this: THE DENIAL THAT GOD MEANS FOR YOU TO HAVE, PRECISELY WHERE YOU ARE AND IN WHAT YOU ARE NOW DOING, AN ABUNDANT LIFE OF JOY AND SIGNIFICANCE ON HIS TERMS - NOT YOURS? Is not SIN the denial that in the middle of the dishpan - the assembly line - the paper work in the office - the drudgery of preparing for examinations - the agonies of a sick bed - or the peril of military service - that PRECISELY THERE is the ABUNDANT LIFE, the JOY our Lord promised to us which, as someone has put it, is WORN BY THE BELIEVER LIKE A HALO AS UNFELT AS HIS HAIR?

Is not unbelief called the greatest of sins simply because we refuse to believe that this is so? For in our view the ABUNDANT LIFE OF JOY AND SIGNIFICANCE is always someplace else - in California or Florida or Las Vegas - in vacations

rather than at work - in making a place for ourselves a rung or two higher up the ladder rather than in the joyful acceptance of a life of love precisely where we are now at this moment.

IT IS THIS SIN: Your life, my life, disfigured by the denial that it is - right where we are, even if it is a bed of ~~palsy~~ paralysis - a life that is valuable, significant, and even beautiful in the eyes of God. Your life, my life, disfigured by the tensions set up through discontent and frustration - warped by the drive to carve out for ourselves a place in the sun on our own terms. IT IS THIS WHICH IS CLEANSED, SET RIGHT. You cannot do it, not of yourself. ONLY GOD can do it through forgiveness - the easiest, the cheapest, yet the most profound word in the Christian vocabulary: TAKE HEART, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN!

And this is what draws men constantly to the CROSS, for in its shadow there is a strange peace. Here a man can know that he is accepted. That is what forgiveness means: ACCEPTANCE. Not because of your brains, your wit, or your good looks - not for the figure you cut in your job - not because you are good, certainly, or even because you may be better than somebody else - but simply because YOU ARE YOU - irreplaceable, infinitely worth-while in the eyes of God.

The simplest and, I suppose, the best analogy is the YOUNG CHILD who is blessed with wise and loving parents - the child who, regardless of whether he is dull witted or bright, homely or handsome, devilish or well behaved, knows that he is ACCEPTED, loved, and constantly forgiven by his parents. And it is that child who, with an assurance he does not consciously recognize, bounds out of the house to play in the sun or runs off to school in the rain - not even aware that the reason why his life has daily joy and purpose and direction is just becuase he is accepted, forgiven, and loved.

This is the assurance - the peace of mind if you like - that the CROSS OF CHRIST bestows upon those who linger in its shadow. For here we know IT DOESN'T COME EASILY. IT COSTS. It costs suffering and rejection and death. And when we dare to kneel down before that CROSS our defenses come down - and we find ourselves being accepted JUST AS WE ARE - without even ONE PLEA.

But you are not to remain prostrate at the Cross - overcome with remorse and the wonder of it. ACCEPTANCE, as with the child, in itself imples the WORD OF ACTION - ARISE AND WALK. It means to get up and go about whatever business you may have with new zest, with confidence and purpose and joy — A NEW CREATION.

Call it salvation - call it whatever you like. This is the primary need of our world - your primary need and mine. This is what Christianity has to offer. In a sense, this is all Christianity has to offer. The rest of it is commentary.

This is why Jesus addresses Himself first to the soul's need: TAKE HEART, MY SON, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN, and then sends that cleansed soul out on sound legs, even as He send you and me back to the same world, the same home, the same job, the same life. But now we go with purpose and meaning to face the overwhelming burden and problems of our world with joy in our hearts and a song on our lips — confident that we are no longer a part of the problem but a part of God's creative answer to the needs of our time. Amen.