19th Sunday after Trinity
Rolling Meadows - 1966

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 9: 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins - He then said to the paralytic - "Rise, take up your bed and go home."

THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING

In order to understand this text you must be able to put yourself in the place of this paralytic. Mark tells us that his friends went to a great deal of trouble to get him to Jesus. Because the crowd was so great that they could not get into the house, they hoisted him onto the roof, removed the tile, and then lowered him down in front of Jesus. Every eye must then have turned to Jesus, expecting Him to relieve the sick man of his suffering. The fact that this was precisely what He did not do undoubtedly caused disappointment in all who were there - but above all to the sick man himself. You can imagine how his heart must have sank when, instead of healing him, Jesus proceeded to talk to him about his sins. What does that have to do with why my friends brought me here? If He really is what He claims to be, why doesn't He answer my prayer the way I am praying it?

The bystanders, the representatives of the church who also in those days represented the medical profession, were disappointed in Him too. I can imagine them saying, for example, Just look at Him, He's making a cunning sneaky dodge; instead of performing a visible healing, he's taking cover in the inscrutable realm of the spiritual. He's evading the issue by taking flight into something that cannot be tested. Obviously he is so anxious to retreat that He is even willing to risk the charge of blasphemy in order to escape disgrace. That's easy, that's cheap! That' what they were thinking. But Jesus, we are told, knowing their thoughts said, Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? Naturally, they would say that it is much easier to say, Your sins are forgiven, because this is something that cannot be verified; so the other is infinitely harder. Then Jesus said, That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.... Rise, take up your bed and walk. And it was done.

Our first reaction, I suppose, is to say: See, Jesus gives us indisputable proof of His ability to forgive sins! Here, at least, He turns faith into sight; He turns what before had to be believed into what can now be seen. But we

would be making a big mistake if we were to interpret this miracle in this way. You don't have to read very much farther in Matthew to discover that the skeptics were not convinced at all. That fact is, when they could find no other explanation for His miracles, they said He did them with the help of Beelzebub, the chief of the devils. Often, after Jesus had performed a miracle, we are told that the people were astonished, or that they were amazed, or that they were afraid (as here), or even that they glorified God - but I don't know of a single instance where the Scriptures say that as the direct result of a miracle people believed on Him. In other words, miracles do not make faith unnecessary; they are not to be understood as proof.

Now actually we do know that the hour will come when faith will end and will see what it has believed. And the our will come when unbelief, too, will end and will be compelled to see what it has not believed. But we know that this moment of sight will be the last moment of history, the moment when Jesus Christ will come back at the end of history to judge the living and the dead. Now, however - and this is the central teaching of the Bible - it has not yet been given to us to see God face to face, now we are still in the state of faith and pilgrimage, still in the state of waiting for that moment, that last moment when we shall lift up our heads. Hence it would be completely unbiblical to think that the function of miracles is to substitute sight for faith. We are still in the forecourt of that sanctuary of final fulfillment where God will be all in all.

The point is this: if the Man does not convince us, the miracles will not convince us either! And then there is this other equally aggravating factor - and that is that at best miracles can have a convincing effect only upon one who is present to experience them. For all who were born later, like us today, these miracles quite automatically cease to be proofs, for, after all, we did not witness them; we have only reports of them. Our relationship to them therefore is very indirect. As one modern skeptic has said, It is one thing to experience a miracle; it is quite another thing merely to receive a report about a miracle.

Elsewhere Jesus says (and I believe this is the key for understanding

all the miracle stories) - Jesus says, If any man's will is to do the will of My Father, he - and only he - shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on My own authority - in other words, whether I am the Christ or whether I am speaking in My own Name and thus am only a fraud. Only he who does the will of the Father will ever find out - nobody else. Faith is a matter of life not of thought or idle speculation. In other words, you must place your whole life at God's disposal and surrender to His will - you must step out and live, and act, and do for Him - and then you will know and your doubts will also be set at rest. And that brings us to the title for this sermon: The proof of the pudding is in the eating. You will find faith in no other way.

With this in mind we can take a closer look at our text. Now characteristically Jesus does not say to the paralytic: Now listen, we men are all sinners and God is a judge. But in certain cases He can allow grace to be reckoned as righteousness. And it is conceivable in your case too, my poor man, that God may make an exception and allow you to be healed. Now, if Jesus had said that (but of course He did not say that), then He would have been merely setting forth a general doctrine about God. He would have been saying that in the last analysis God is identical with the moral order of the world, with the law of guilt and retribution - and God is the executive officer who carries out this retribution, this avenging. But occasionally He makes an exception. If Jesus had said this, He would have been stating a doctrine about God, He would have been a teacher, a theologian; and there have been many others in all ages who have set forth their theories about God, judgment, and the moral order of the world.

But the fact is that something happened in this story that was totally different from anything that ever happened before in the history of ethics, philosophy, or religion. That is to say, the moment Jesus said, Your sins are forgiven, He was not teaching, but acting. He says, Your sins are forgiven. And in more precise terms this means: It is true, of course, that God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children; it is true that the principle of retaliation prevails in the world and that God punishes the guilty. But look, my poor man, now

you have met ME and I have the authority to take your hand and put it back into the hand of the Father; I can open the door of the Father's house for you; look, it's opening now. I say to you, it's opening, and you are God's child again. This is what Jesus does. Se we insist: Jesus does not teach the possibility of forgiveness, He accomplishes it, He enacts it. Jesus does not talk about the chains of guilt and does not deliver an ethical lecture on what is good and what is evil; He bursts the chains so that they fall clattering to the ground.

In our Communion Service we have an illustration of what happens here. After the members of the congregation confess that they truly acknowledge, confess, and lament their sins, the pastor makes this declaration: I by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the Name and in the stead of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Don't you see, in this tremendous moment the pastor does not talk about there being such a thing as forgiveness in the world or of a loving God; he delcares this forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. This Word spoken from the altar is not just teaching; it is an effectuating Word. And whenever I am privileged to say, I forgive you all your sins, I want to add in thought, Rise, take up your bed and go home. Now you can really go away a new man, now something has really happened to you, something that wasn't there before. I have not been merely teaching and instructing you as we do on some occasions. Rather, now something has broken into your life. Now you can go home in the name of this miracle with this new beginning which God has bestowed upon you.

So with the Miracle Jesus is not trying to prove His power to forgive sins. Rather He is saying: When I call a halt to this disease, this is an authoritative intervention in the course of natural law; and in exactly the same way, it is an authoritative intervention in the law of guilt and retribution when I say, Your sins are forgiven. Both are acts, both are interventions in the iron forces of law; here a Stronger One is at work; here the Son of God is breaking the chains That's the meaning of this miracle, that and nothing else! Its purpose is not to

prove and therefore to be something more than the Word, but rather to expound and interpret the Word. It expresses the fact that the Word of forgiveness is not a matter of teaching and doctrine, but rather of an act: Your sins are forgiven! Rise, take up your bed and go home! Both - the forgiveness of sins and the healing - are two sides of the same coin.

Thus we are back where we started and are thrown back upon faith. The fact is that the Word of God is defenseless against all mistaken ideas. And the remarkable thing is that it wants to be defenseless, for God does not want to force us to repentance, to bow the knee to Him. God does not shout down from heaven with loudspeakers simply to make us stop, listen, and conclude that this is a different voice from that which we ordinarily hear in the world. He speak to men in all quietness and calls them to decision. There is not one of us who can read or listen to the healing miracles of the New Testament without making a decision about Jesus. Either you say, My Lord and my God, I too am sick, I too am sinful, I too am one who walks to death where no man can help us across, I too need you. Or you say, Depart from me, You magician - even if this is expressed only by a shake of the head or a shrug of the shoulders.... So we say it again: The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Jesus Christ wants to be sought by those who are willing to stake their life on Him. Only he who seeks Him so will ever find the evidence of His miracles - in his own life too. Seek, seek Him with all your heart! For God assures us: You will seek Me and find Me; when you seek Me with all your heart. Amen.