



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Your Sins are Forgiven

Luke 5:17-24

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Back in the Fall of 2011 the Occupy protestors took over Diana Krall Plaza in Nanaimo. Veronica and I were down there for the day and as I was walking through the plaza I ended up caught in the crossfire between one of the protest organisers and a counter protestor. One was arguing that “big business” was the cause of all of our problems and the other was telling the first that he needed to get off his lazy hippie backside and get a job. The first guy was clamouring for some form of Communism and the second was defending Corporatism. As I was passing by the first guy tried to hand me some literature and they sucked me into their debate. I agreed that both sides of the debate had legitimate concerns and for just a minute they were *both* smiling at me, but that didn’t last very long. I suggested that the problem wasn’t “business” or “people” but the government they were both trying to capture to further their own interests. “How about reducing the size and influence of the State so that each of us can be free to pursue our own interests without interference?” I said. Suddenly they were *both* mad at me. Protestors don’t like counter-protestors, but neither of them liked me stepping in to offer a third solution.

What does that have to do with Luke’s Gospel? In our lesson this morning we see Jesus encountering the Pharisees for the first time. Everyone who knows even a little bit about Jesus knows that he and the Pharisees didn’t get along. But why

was that? Let me address that before we get into the text. Like the Occupiers, the Pharisees were a protest movement. Understand that they didn’t have any official status as Jewish civil or religious authorities. Some of them may have been priests, but it wasn’t a priestly movement. They were a group of men who saw a problem, had what they thought was the answer, and were trying to influence society to bring about the change they thought was needed.

Specifically, the problem they saw was one that most Jews understood. God’s people were living in exile as if God had abandoned them. Yes, they had returned from Babylon, they’d rebuilt Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, but they were still occupied by foreign pagans, the high priest and his cronies were sold out to those foreigners, and just as significant, even though the temple had been rebuilt and was more grand and glorious than ever, the manifestation of God’s glory had never returned to the holy of holies. In Solomon’s day the *shekinah*—the glory cloud—filled that most holy place. Guarded by golden cherubim, the ark of the covenant was God’s footstool. He abided in the cosmos, but his “feet” rested in the temple, in Jerusalem, in the centre of what was supposed to be his kingdom. But nothing had been right for hundreds of years. And so in Jesus’ day everyone was waiting for the Messiah to come as the prophets had foretold. And they were waiting for him to come to rescue and to vindicate his people. The Pharisees, however, had a unique take on the problem. They were convinced that God had not come to vindicate his people and to judge his enemies because his own people, the Jews, weren’t being faithful enough to his law, to the *torah*. The priesthood was corrupt and the people had compromised. And so the Pharisees

made it their mission to call the people to repentance, to call them away from compromise, and to call them to a more faithful observance of *torah*. When Israel finally straightened up and was flying right, *then* the Lord would send his Anointed One to liberate and to rule over Israel and to defeat her enemies.

Now, Luke’s been telling us over and over that word of Jesus had been going out all over the land. People were talking about how he preached and healed with authority and how he described his ministry using the same language the prophets had used to describe the Messiah. It didn’t take long for word to reach the Pharisees. And they didn’t like what they heard. Had Jesus been teaching people how to be better keepers of the law the Pharisees would have left him alone—that was their goal too. They would have seen Jesus as being at least more or less on their side. But instead, Jesus was preaching that the kingdom had come *already*—if that were true the Pharisees would have rejoiced—but Jesus’ kingdom didn’t look like their kingdom. The Pharisees’ kingdom *excluded* sinners. It kept the outsiders on the outside. Jesus seemed to be doing the opposite. Jesus was *embracing* sinners and outsiders—even welcoming them in. The Pharisees were working for purity and Jesus was effectively undoing all their hard work! And so Luke tells us that they gathered from all over the land to hear and to see Jesus for themselves. Look at 5:17.

On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal.

The power of the Lord was with him. Luke reminded us at the end of the last part of the chapter that it was Jesus' practise to leave the crowds behind so that he could find solitary places to pray. He knew where his source of power lay—and not just power in the sense of his ability to heal, but his power in the sense of his guide in ministry and the source of his authority. He spent time with his Father. As we've seen, crowds gathered to meet Jesus because he was different, because he spoke with authority and healed with power. People knew—they could *see*—that the Lord was at work in and through him. Maybe he really was the Messiah. Maybe God's kingdom really was breaking in. But if that was true, it meant the Pharisees were wrong.

Luke says that Pharisees and the teachers of the law came to see Jesus. Usually the “teachers of the law” are referred to as “scribes” in the gospels. These were “lawyers”—they were the ones who worked with the Pharisees to determine what it looked like to obey *torah*, what was pure and what was impure—ultimately, what and who were on the “inside” and what and who were on the “outside”. And Luke says they were “sitting there”. They had taken the position of authority. They had come to hear and to see Jesus so that they could evaluate and judge whether he and his message were really from God. And into this setting comes the perfect situation for Jesus to show them what he's all about. Look at verses 18-19:

And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him

down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus.

Again, an “outsider” comes to Jesus for help. The leper we saw last week was the “outsider of all outsiders”, but even this paralysed man was on the outside. It's not that people wouldn't associate with him—this man obviously had some good friends. But being paralysed he had second-class status. Had he been a Levite, his paralysis would have barred him from the priesthood. In looking at purity groups, which the Pharisees represented, we have evidence that physical deformities and problems kept people from full membership. And remember that in that culture, people assumed that physical handicaps were the result of sin in some way or another. So when this man's friends carry his stretcher to the place where Jesus is and are kept out by the crowds, that exclusion becomes something of a metaphor for this man's entire life. He's an outsider. And yet his friends are persistent. They climb onto the roof, carrying their friend, and they disassemble a section so that they can lower his stretcher down to Jesus. That's persistence! It's also evidence of the power and authority Jesus had. They truly believed that Jesus could do the things he claimed.

In contrast think of today's faith healers. I know people who have taken loved ones to see some faith healer visiting their town. There are sadly far too many similar stories that have been published and told on TV. The common theme is that they weren't able to give a financial donation large enough to get past the security guards or they and all the other people with serious sicknesses and deformities were held back while people with minor and psychosomatic illnesses were taken to the stage to be “healed”. All these

people talk about leaving disappointed and jaded. Some even gave up on the faith altogether. In contrast, Jesus exuded so much divine authority that these men weren't going to be stopped by a crowd. They weren't even stopped by the walls or the roof of the house. Jesus was no TV phoney. They *knew* Jesus could heal their friend and they took extreme measures to get him to Jesus. And their persistence didn't go unnoticed. Picture Jesus there teaching—and this time in front of a hostile audience of Pharisees and lawyers—as some dust falls from the ceiling and a man is lowered in front of him on a stretcher.

And when he saw their faith, he said, “Man, your sins are forgiven you.” (Luke 5:20)

How do you *see* faith? Brothers and sisters, we see faith as it *motivates our actions*. What's the relationship between faith and works? I can't think of a better illustration than this. Because of the faith of this man and his friends, Jesus healed him, but it was in their “works”—in their incredible persistence to get their friend to him—that he saw their faith. St. James tells us that faith without works is dead. Had these men had “faith without works” they would have seen the crowd and carried their friend back home still paralysed. Because they truly believed, they stopped at nothing to get their friend to Jesus and because they stopped at nothing, Jesus knew their faith was real.

And this plays to the Pharisees. You see, like other faithful Jews, the Pharisees believed that when God did finally come in judgement to rescue and vindicate his people and to destroy their enemies, he would recognise his people by their works—by their faithfulness to

torah. And Jesus dramatically illustrates this right in front of them. His message was that the kingdom of God was finally breaking in—the moment they had been waiting for—and here were some men who truly believed that the kingdom had come in Jesus. They took extreme measures to embrace him and his kingdom and he acknowledges their faith and vindicates them. He actually does right here what the Pharisees were expecting the Lord’s Messiah to do when he came for his people. And yet as much as this is what they were expecting, Jesus turns it all upside-down. The Pharisees were expecting God to vindicate the faith of all the pure, *torah*-keeping insiders while punishing all the outsiders, but here Jesus vindicates the faith of an outsider and welcomes him into the kingdom. That’s the main significance of Jesus’ “Your sins are forgiven.” Sin is what keeps us from God, what keeps us on the outside and away from his presence. Forgiveness draws us in—it makes us “insiders” in the kingdom.

The way Luke phrases Jesus’ words of forgiveness in Greek shows that it was in the forgiving that the man’s healing took place. It’s not that Jesus forgave him and then healed him later after the Pharisees protested. To forgive was to heal. The phrasing¹ also underscores that this man’s sins had been forgiven *by God*; Jesus is the one authorised by God to give the absolution. Luke’s point is that Jesus, as the Messiah, is the Lord’s agent. But the Pharisees and lawyers weren’t ready to accept that. They heard Jesus and got angry.

And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies?”

Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

“Jesus, you can’t do that!” Again, if Jesus is right, this is a total game changer and it points to the rest of Jesus’ ministry. The Pharisees saw the kingdom as one that *judged* and *excluded* sinners. Jesus has now come and the kingdom of God is breaking in, but instead of judging and excluding sinners, Jesus is *forgiving* and *welcoming* them into his kingdom. As if that weren’t bad enough, Jesus is also bypassing everything that the Pharisees, not to mention the rest of the Jews, associated with forgiveness. Remember that forgiveness for sins involved the temple, the priests, and the whole system of sacrifices: cleansing rituals, sacrifices and offerings, observing the annual festivals and especially the Day of Atonement. Declaration of forgiveness only came from the priests and only at the temple and only after the necessary sacrifices and rituals had been observed. What Jesus was saying was blasphemous as far as the Pharisees were concerned.

Jesus responds to them prophetically—giving a special display of his authority for their benefit. Look at verse 22.

When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, “Why do you question in your hearts?”

Jesus shows his authority by revealing that he knows their hearts. And in response to what they’re thinking, he throws out another game changer. He asserts his own authority, but in verse 24 he refers to himself as the Son of Man. This was a title loaded with meaning and significance for the Jews. This was the title used in Daniel 7 for the one

to whom the Lord would give “dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him”; the Son of Man was the one who would have an “everlasting dominion” (Daniel 7:14). The Son of Man was the one everyone was expecting to come in judgement, to vindicate the righteous and to punish sinners. And now Jesus stresses that he is this Son of Man—but instead of coming to judge and destroy sinners, he’s coming to forgive their sins and to draw them into his kingdom. Look at verses 23-24:

Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed—“I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home.”

Jesus stresses that something new is happening. His kingdom isn’t what people were expecting. To forgive sins requires two things that Luke has told us Jesus had. First, you have to have the power to forgive sins. Only God has that power. Second, you have to have authority. In the Old Covenant, God delegated that authority to the priests. And so forgiveness was found as the people worked in faith through the sacrificial system of the temple and the priesthood. And now Jesus cuts through all of that. He claims God’s power to forgive and he also bypasses not only the priests and the temple, but the whole sacrificial system itself as he claims that authority for himself. The Pharisees didn’t believe it, but Jesus backs up his claim by asking the man on the stretcher to get up and walk. The point isn’t that Jesus is ranking healing over forgiveness or forgiveness over healing. Remember, the way Luke phrases

¹ Perfect passive.

Jesus' words tells us that the healing took place at the moment Jesus pronounced forgiveness. The point is that the man's sin problem and his physical problem are linked. We've seen this all along. Just as demon-possession, fever, and leprosy—the things we've seen Jesus heal so far—are all the end result of humanity's universal sin problem, so is this man's paralysis. He wouldn't be paralysed if he had access to the tree of life, but every single one of us has been barred from the tree of life because of our sin. And so for Jesus, to heal the man was to give a dramatic proof of his also having dealt with the man's sin problem. Jesus' claims to have both the power and authority to forgive are legitimate.

And so Luke tells us in verses 25-26:

And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today."

Immediately he rose up, took his bed, and went home, glorifying God. This was the evidence that Jesus was the Son of Man prophesied by Daniel. This was the evidence that Jesus had both the power and authority to forgive sins. And this was the evidence that the kingdom was breaking in and that everything was about to be turned upside-down. When Luke reports the people saying that they had seen "extraordinary things", the Greek word for "extraordinary" is *paradoxa*. It's the word from which we get the English word "paradox". The people had seen something that was amazing, but they had trouble processing it—they had trouble fitting it into their expectations and

their understanding of how God and the world worked. And yet as much as it was a "paradox" for them, they glorified God. They didn't understand, but they knew he was at work in Jesus and they knew that in Jesus he was doing something wonderful. With faith even the people on the "outside" can find a share in the kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, consider what this means for us. The scandal of Jesus ministry was that he challenged the people's allegiances and understanding of God's kingdom. For the Jews the kingdom was about a nation and about an ethnicity and it was centred on the temple and on the priests and on the sacrificial system. If they wanted purity and forgiveness, that was where they turned. And now Jesus had come and he had bypassed all of that. He made it all obsolete. God's presence had been gone from the temple since the exile and in Jesus he had returned. But this time Jesus himself embodied a new temple—a temple not made with hands—and Jesus himself embodied the kingdom of God. And in this new kingdom, purity and forgiveness are found in Jesus himself. He is the new temple, he is the great high priest, and as the story unfolds we'll see that he is the perfect sacrifice, the spotless Lamb of God.

Our culture isn't centred on temple and priests and sacrifice as the culture of First Century Judaea was, but we do look for purity and forgiveness in other places and things. Some people look for these things in pagan gods and ritual, some people look for them in politics, some people look for them in social justice, but in each case, we're looking to tip the scales of justice in our favour. The temple and priests and sacrifices of the Old Covenant remind us that none of us can ever

earn forgiveness. God is simply too perfectly holy. No sin, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem to us, can stand in his presence. No amount of good works can completely remove our guilt. But thanks be to God that in Jesus the kingdom has broken into the world. While the Old Covenant reminds us that we stand on the outside because of our sin, the New Covenant offers the good news that Jesus has conquered sin and death, that he has become the perfect sacrifice for our sins, and that he welcomes us into his kingdom with open arms full of forgiveness and healing. Brothers and sisters, all that's required is that we turn away from all our other false lords and saviours, that we turn away from trying to earn God's forgiveness and favour on our own, and instead recognise that Jesus is Lord and embrace him as the one who forgives our sins and welcomes us into the kingdom.

Let us pray: Father, thank you for the example of this paralysed man and his friends. Thank you for the example of faith we have in them. Strengthen our faith we pray that we might trust Jesus with the same persistent faith that they did. And remind us, Lord, of the nature of your kingdom. Reminds us always of your grace and that Jesus came not to condemn—the world already stands condemned—but that he came to offer forgiveness and a means of escape from condemnation. As we have experienced grace and forgiveness, let us share your grace and forgiveness with all those still condemned and still living on the outside of your kingdom. We ask this through Jesus Christ. Amen.