

Follow Me!

Hosea 6:1-6, Matthew 9:1-17

January 16, 2000

My grandfather Bailey was paralyzed for the last year of his life. I was only thirteen years old. He had been a strong man. He had been a pilot, I believe in the Army Air Force before those services were divided. He used to fly a biplane with a wooden propeller. I have seen one like it in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. By the time World War I came around he was already an instructor for other pilots. He was a farmer, a hunter, a fisherman—what great delight that gave him. He was an Elder in the Presbyterian Church. But then he had a stroke and for the last year of his life he never got out of bed. He used to throw bales of hay up on top of the trailer when I was too little to pick up a bale of hay. And all the other men, my father and uncles, had me do was drive the tractor. But then he was paralyzed, and try as he could, he could no more lift his empty hand than I could have lifted his hospital bed with him in it, single handedly.

My fondest memory of my grandfather was the time he took many of his grandchildren fishing with him. He did this frequently, but his time in particular my cousin Teddy had caught nothing, and my grandfather managed quietly to catch a fish, to tell Teddy that he needed to check his bait, to get that hook up, to get the fish on it, to get it back in the water with no one else seeing it. And Teddy thought he had caught a fish. And I was old enough to appreciate it, and old enough to keep my mouth shut. Ted is now an attorney in Clarksville, Tennessee, and someday I am going to tell him about the fish he did not catch.

But the last year of his life my grandfather seemed a different man. Paralyzed, immobile, saying things he never would have said before. It was a terrible loss. Even second-hand I can appreciate the horror of paralysis. Some of you listening to me here have greater knowledge of it than I do, and perhaps some of you listening on the radio know it better than that.

Because of this knowledge that we share, we can appreciate the power and the authority of Jesus Christ which we read about today who with his words both healed a man of paralysis and forgave his sins. The crowds were afraid, and rightly so. And they glorified God. The one who created the world also governs it. The one who authored life continues to give life. The one who calls us his own has not forgotten us. The one who made us for himself forgives our sin and restores us to himself.

And this is where we come to the good news, for the physical healing of the paralysis, wonderful as it is and as grateful for it as we are, is simply an outward manifestation of the even greater authority of Jesus Christ to forgive our sins. Before Jesus said, “Rise, take up your bed and go home,” he had already said, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

Before he healed the outer sickness, he had already touched the inner wound. Even though the man’s friends had brought him to Jesus to be healed of paralysis, Jesus had gone directly to the much deeper problem first. Only when that was taken care of did he turn to the other, and here is good news for us in today’s reading in the Gospel According to Matthew: God in Jesus Christ, forgives our sin.

Here is the gospel for us in a sentence: “Your sins are forgiven.” These are the words which can calm our troubled souls and breathe new life into our disease-ridden old lives. This is what the resurrected and living Christ would have us hear yet today, “My children, your sins are forgiven.”

Now to back up a little bit, the scribes who objected to this had it right in a way. To say that only God can forgive sin is correct. The only problem was they drew the wrong conclusion from that. From the truth that only God can forgive sin, they concluded that Jesus must be blaspheming, must be claiming to be God, must be using God’s name in vain, must have been a terrible sinner.

But they failed to consider an alternative conclusion. If only God can forgive sin—and that is true—and if Jesus is forgiving sin—and that is true, too—then maybe we ought to open our eyes and hearts and minds to the wonderful reality that God is in Christ, and that Jesus is Emanuel, “God with us.” That is what the Christmas stories were all about. Jesus is Emanuel, God with us. And here he is living out the prerogatives of that—forgiving sin, something that only God is supposed to do.

Is Jesus Christ a teacher? Yes, of course he is a teacher. And yet he is much more than that. He is also the Son of God. And here in this reading is a direct claim to that authority, to the authority of God in him, in person, on earth to forgive sin. Those who would regard him as a teacher and only a teacher have to ignore or to deny this very teaching and this very claim. However, if he is only a teacher, then this teaching is either a mistake so that he is not a very good teacher, or it is a lie which is even worse. But the point is that this is not a mistake, and this is not a lie. This is the truth. Jesus is the Son of God. The one who has authority to heal disease and to forgive sin.

The good news for us is this gospel of forgiveness. There are two parts to it. One is forgiveness received, and one is forgiveness extended to others.

We are the recipients of this good news. “My children, your sins are forgiven.” We hear this, we receive this, we are healed, we rejoice. And because of

that good news coming to us, that is also the way we live toward others. We then become people who are both forgiven and forgiving, forgiving of others of wrongs they have done us. Will you believe this good news today?

There is more to the gospel than forgiveness. The reading goes on from here. The very next thing that happens is that Jesus calls a tax collector to follow him. Jesus issues to Matthew a call to discipleship saying, "Follow me." And Matthew followed him.

These simple words, "Follow me," are as powerful or perhaps even more powerful than the words in the previous paragraph, "Your sins are forgiven, rise and go home." There we heard the words to heal and to forgive, powerful as they are. Here are the words that are a call to discipleship, as powerful or even more powerful.

We remember there are some remarkable events recorded in Chapter 8. Jesus touched and so healed the untouchable leper. Jesus appreciated the faith of and so healed with a word the servant of a Roman centurion. Jesus touched and so healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever. But even these remarkable events pale by comparison with Jesus befriending and calling into discipleship a low-down, despised, probably crooked, skimming off the top, betraying his own people, collaborating with the enemy, tax collector. Now if these others were religious, ethnic, and gender outcasts and untouchables, here was a social outcast and an untouchable in a situation far worse than all of theirs. To bring him into friendship was a greater miracle and a greater healing even of that of the paralytic of which we just read. Jesus was reaching across and leaping across boundaries and tearing down the dividing walls of hostility at a dizzying pace, and while some appreciated it, and some rejoiced, the reaction that he gets from others points ahead to his crucifixion, which is not very far down the road. What he was doing simply could not be tolerated.

For the ongoing Christian church, it is important to learn from this part of today's reading that faith matters. Healing is the beginning point. The healing of the paralysis, the forgiveness of sins is good, and true, and important, but it is the beginning point. It is not the conclusion; it is not the end. It is not the be all and end all of the Christian life. It is where we start, and Christian life goes on from that point forward.

We are called to a life of following, of believing, of obeying, and of forgiving. Indeed we are called to a life of discipleship, and in a backward sort of way, it makes my heart rejoice that if there was room for one as despicable as Matthew, maybe there is room even for me in this great crowd of disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus extends to us today an invitation—"Follow me." These words to us are both powerful and effective, indeed so much so that they virtually become a command,

not only an invitation. Jesus calls us to be disciples, he names us as disciples, he makes us his disciples, and so we are. He speaks to us today in this reading and preaching of his gospel just as surely, just as truly, as he spoke to Matthew then and there.

Will you follow? Will you believe? Will you obey? Will you dedicate your life to Jesus Christ?

As the story goes on, we find that Jesus was not content to call just one tax collector. He threw a dinner party and had a house full of tax collectors, and sinners, and other outcasts. This was scandalous. But that is why Jesus came. As he said, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Jesus not only heals our diseases, Jesus not only forgives our sins, Jesus not only calls individual followers, but he also establishes us into a community of reconciliation. Now the scribes had complained about his forgiving sin, now the pharisees complain about his keeping such company. It was not appropriate that a teacher and a religious leader should break bread with and sit at table with sinners and tax collectors and other undesirables.

In response to them Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea, who reports the words of the Lord, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” This does not say that we are not to worship, but it does say that the goal of the Christian life is not the perfection of ritual, but it is instead the worshipping and rejoicing community of the faithful gathered from all walks of life and all the nations of the world around the risen and living Jesus Christ.

Jesus goes on to speak about this new reality in comparison with a new creation. Just as new wine ferments and would destroy what was old, and thus has to be contained in something new, so does this new community have to be a new creation. The scribes had their turn; the pharisees had their turn. Now it is the disciples of John the Baptist who bring their complaints. They were worried about all of this eating instead of good, old-fashioned, pious fasting like all of the other religious sorts of the time. In response to them Jesus again uses daring language picking up frequent comparisons in the Old Testament of God with a groom and Israel as his bride, for here Jesus speaks of himself as the bridegroom. Was this blasphemy? Was this a mistake? Was this a lie? No, this was the truth. Jesus is God among us, and in his presence the kingdom of God has begun.

He sets for us here the goal of reconciliation. This goal is something that will be achieved not by our works, not by our doings, not by our efforts, but only by the gospel of forgiveness and by the call to discipleship of which we have just read. And in this goal and in this future of the life of the church, we will find there young and old, male and female, rich and poor, persons of all races, nations, ethnicities,

and cultures, all who would worship the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, all who believe in the resurrected and living Jesus Christ.

The question coming to us is whether we are going to stand back and join in the complaints of the scribes, and the pharisees, and the disciples of John the Baptist, or are we going to join the party that is the kingdom of God, the reconciliation of the people to the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Today's gospel may be summarized and memorized in three short sentences quoting from Jesus Christ which I commend to you today. "Your sins are forgiven." "Follow me." "I desire mercy."

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org