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Epiphany 7

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“Which is Easier?”

Text: Mark 2:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

You know, we live in a very confusing world where things are not the way they're supposed to be. With tragedies and accidents and diseases and terror that seem to strike at random. Consider just the past couple of weeks; night club fires, another Shuttle disaster, terror alerts, organ transplant errors, sudden and unexpected death, and diseases like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's and cancer continuing to take their toll on people. It's not an easy world to live in. And try as we might to make this world a better place to live in, these things just seem to keep happening, don't they? *Changing* with the times perhaps, but never ending. And it is hard to find peace in such a troubled and confusing world.

And so it was also in Jesus' day – not an easy world to live in. Today we heard of a man who was paralyzed and brought to Jesus for healing . . . and brought in quite an extraordinary way! Lowered through the roof when the way to Jesus through the door was blocked. Good, dedicated friends, those four. Trying in their own small way to make this world a better place to live in. . . . We're not told anything about their friend, this paralyzed man. I wonder how long he had been paralyzed for? I wonder if it was because of a disease, or an accident, like a fall? I wonder if his friends who brought him to Jesus were maybe feeling guilty because *they* played some part in the accident that caused him to become paralyzed? They had heard they He could heal . . .

Jesus was busy preaching when the people first began to notice . . . things falling from the roof . . . and pretty soon all eyes were probably looking up, and then the mat is lowered . . . carefully, slowly, right to Jesus. And all eyes are now riveted on Jesus. The Scribes who were there, the ordinary people, the four friends, the paralytic . . . all looking at Jesus. You could probably have heard a pin drop! What would Jesus do?

“My son, your sins are forgiven.”

Well that was not what they expected! Not at all! And, thought the Scribes to

themselves, in their hearts, now this guy has *really* crossed the line! ***“Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”*** Perhaps even a murmur began spreading through the house, the people looking at the Scribes to see what they would say! . . . But it is Jesus who speaks next, because He knows what is in their hearts and minds. ***“Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’”*** . . . It’s a good question – and not only for the people gathered in that house, but for you and I and people in our world today. Which is easier? . . . But Jesus doesn’t give them time to answer, but continues, ***“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ – He said to the paralytic – ‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home.’ And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that all were amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”***

Isn’t it interesting: at forgiveness, they grumbled. At the healing, they were amazed. Should it not have been the other way around?

But we have the same problem today. How do I know? Because we have trouble answering Jesus’ question too! Which is easier . . . to heal or to forgive? Which is easier *for God*? How do we answer that?

Perhaps the reason why we have such trouble and indecision in answering that question is because in our confusing world we are often confused about our enemy. About exactly *who* and *what* it is that we are fighting.

+ And so if we see disease or paralysis as the problem, as the enemy, then we fight against it with foundations and research.

+ If we see violence and guns as the problem, as the enemy, then we fight against them with metal detectors and gun control laws.

+ If we see death as the problem, as the enemy, then we fight against it with medicine and machines, and now genetics and cloning and more.

+ If we see crime as the problem, as the enemy, we fight against it with tougher law enforcement and more jails.

And if all of these things, and *more*, are the problems, the enemies in our world today, then no wonder our world is in the shape its in! We’re fighting on so many fronts! And the result is that it is almost impossible to find peace in such a troubled and confusing and turbulent world. We’re too busy fighting all these different things.

But notice that Jesus doesn't have that problem! Because He diagnoses the problem differently than us. And so when that paralytic was lowered to Him through the roof, or a leper comes up to Him, or someone who was deaf or blind, or prostitute or tax collector heavy with guilt – Jesus does not see many problems, but one problem, one enemy. And so Jesus treats the problem not as we see it, but as He sees it. ***“My son, your sins are forgiven.”***

Our problem, our enemy is sin. The sin in the world, the sin in us. All those other things, disease, paralysis, violence, crime, death, anger, hatred, and more – all of those things are the *symptoms*, but not the problem, not the enemy. The problem is sin. The sin in others that wells up against us, and the sin in us that wells up against others, and the sin in the world which, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, causes this to be a very confusing world where things are not the way they're supposed to be. . . . Perhaps an example here is in order – something that happened to me just this past Tuesday. As you know, we had a bit of snow over the weekend, and so on Monday it was time to shovel out. And so I did, shoveling our sidewalks and parking spaces. Well, I woke up early on Tuesday morning and looked out the window, and lo and behold, someone had taken one of my parking spaces! One of the parking spaces that I had worked so hard to shovel out and clear! What gall and nerve! And all the ugly sin in me began to boil up! And so I began to think, what should I do to him? Write a nasty note? Or get him towed! That'd teach him a lesson, wouldn't it!

But do you see? That person is not my enemy! My enemy is all that sin and anger that lives inside of me, that caused those thoughts and hatred. Jesus can heal my sicknesses and diseases, He can deliver me from crime and violence, He can give me a long life and many friends and riches and more, but my sin would still be there. Destroying me from the inside out. . . . Those other things, that we think are the enemy? **That's the easy part!** The One who made the world can give the blessings of this world. The One who creates life can heal that life. The One who created the angels can send those angels to guard and protect us. The Almighty can do almighty things. That's the easy part! . . . But what about our real problem, our real enemy?

“My son, your sins are forgiven.”

Jesus has come to do not only that which was easy, but that which was hard. He came to deal with our sin and fight our enemy. Sometimes we think it would be nice if God would just speak a word and destroy sin with His almighty power! But God could not do that, because in destroying sin in that way, God would also have destroyed us. Because that is what we are. Sinners. Sinners in our thoughts, words, deeds, and desires. Sinners

deserving death. . . . And so to provide forgiveness, Jesus had to do what was hard – and that was to come in our place, in weakness, as a man, take all of our death-deserving sin on Himself, bear it on the cross, suffer the wrath and punishment of His Father against it, and die our death. Was that easy? He cried at the havoc of our sin. He sweat drops like blood in torment in the Garden of Gethsemane. He cried out to His Father from the cross ***“Why have you forsaken me?”*** He endured the full and relentless attack of Satan against Him. It was not easy – His fight, His sacrifice, His death. It was the hard part. . . . But He did it for you. He allowed Himself to be defeated in your place, so that when He rose from the dead, so would you! So that His triumph would be your triumph! His victory, your victory! His life, your life. So that the words spoken to the paralytic would not be empty words, but the powerful words of God declaring you and me and all **not guilty**. So that our enemy would be stripped of his power and defeated. So that even though sin still does live inside of us and clings to us and wells up in us and causes us to do that which we do not want to do, in Christ, it cannot win. In Christ, God does not count our sin against us. In Christ, ***“your sins are forgiven.”***

And so the result is that in Christ there is peace. The peace that the world cannot give. Peace in the midst of a confusing world. The peace that the world, constantly fighting, craves. It is the peace that only our Saviour can give. The peace of sins forgiven. And the victory of Christ and His forgiveness are here for us. Even here and now continuing to vanquish our enemy, as here and now in Word and water and bread and wine Jesus comes to us and speaks to us saying, ***“My son, my daughter, your sins are forgiven.”*** And they are.

And like the paralytic, we rise up, and depart in peace. Should we not be amazed at this? . . . Perhaps sometimes we grumble, that we have not received more, or better, in this life. But which is easier? . . . And what do you think happened to the paralytic after he was healed? Do you think he had any problems after that? Do you think he struggled and suffered after that? Do you think the enemy kept after him? Sure! And the enemy will keep after us as well and try to make this world that we live in as confusing and as turbulent as he possibly can! But Jesus cuts through the confusion. Jesus does have power and authority on earth to forgive sins, and give clarity and peace. . . . And with that same power and authority He is going to one day return and tell us to **“Arise!”** And we will arise, as He did – from death – *“to live with Him in righteousness and innocence and blessedness forever.”* And we will glorify God *“with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven.”* Just as we have begun to do so now, though now still imperfectly. For our Saviour has come and done for us what was not easy, that we might live in Him both now on earth, and forever in Heaven. And if we are to be amazed, be amazed at this. At His great love and forgiveness, to do all of this for helpless, paralyzed sinners like you and me.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.