

"A LOVING AND A HEALING MINISTRY"

TEXT: "Your sins are forgiven; pick up your bed and walk".
(John 5: 8)

INTRODUCTION Some of you may remember the name of Gabriel Heater. A well-known news commentator of the thirties and forties, he usually opened his radio newscasts with "There's good news tonight". We could use a commentator like that today. I think we could find some good news if we had someone who would ~~believe it and~~ report it...and believe it.

I hope you'll sense something of that spirit today as we are reminded of the incredible good news that Christ's ~~loving and~~ healing ministry is as strong and as meaningful today as it was back there in the days of the early Church.

DEVELOPMENT Today's scripture reading provided us with a scene, an occasion when this "good news" was being proclaimed and demonstrated. Word had begun to spread that Jesus had arrived in Capernaum and the crowd was pushing into the house where he was staying. There were so many people there, it was impossible to get in through the front door. They knew that wherever He was, the lives of people changed....and a lot of people came to have their lives changed. In fact, one man had four friends carry him on a stretcher to get there. They tried to get in through the front door and when they could not make it, they climbed up on the roof, took the slates off, and let this man down in the midst of the crowd. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven!"

Now this was bordering on heresy - to say in the midst of the scribes and the Pharisees "your sins are forgiven". According to their point of view, the only way to heal anybody was to go to the synagogue, go through penance and the rules that were necessary for such things. "Blasphemy" they shouted. "Who are you to heal anybody?" And Jesus quietly said, "Isn't it easier to say, 'your sins are forgiven' than to say 'pick up your pallet and walk?'" And he said to the man, "Your sins are forgiven; pick up your bed and walk". And the man did.

GOOD NEWS Jesus was announcing something that has changed the world. He did not say "I heal you", nor did He tell the man to go over there and wash several times, or do whatever the priests say to do. He just announced the fact: your sins are forgiven. In other words, He said to the man, "You're OK. Get up and walk. Pick up your bed. Go home".

The man had clearly paralyzed himself by what he thought and what He believed and probably by what other people thought about him. In those days, if you carried around a heavy load of guilt and did not get it cleared by the local priest, you could make yourself sick. Jesus helped him by telling him the "good news". Don't worry about all those things they're holding against you. You're forgiven. God loves you! Remember that. Get up. Walk. Go your way.

How we need to hear that good news today! After the death and resurrection of our Lord, the early church members were empowered with the same loving and healing ministry. They not only talked about healing. They were healed. They ceased to paralyze themselves by what they thought about themselves, or what they knew others were thinking about them. People were healed by that good news!

PARALYZING OURSELVES TODAY

I think many people today - just as in our Lord's day - paralyze themselves in something of the same way. We have the same good news in that announcement of Jesus, "Your sins are forgiven." We may express it a bit differently or come at it from a different approach. You're making yourself sick by what you think and by what you believe. Take up your bed. Walk. However, this is one thing to say, but another to believe and really experience.

It was about fifteen years ago that I came down with some severe chest pains that were associated with muscle strain. I had tried to lift and move one of those 100 gallon drums of liquid cleaner here in the basement of the Church. The doctor arrived on the scene at six in the morning and took a cardiogram. My wife thought I was getting ready to depart from this world. I wasn't conscious and didn't even remember it after the attack was over. Anyway, I ended up spending two weeks in the Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn. I was on complete bed rest for fifteen days. I stayed in bed, getting weaker and weaker, paralyzing myself by thinking and fearing. Finally, at the end of those two weeks, the doctor came in and after having checked out all the tests, said, "It's not your heart. As far as we can tell you're OK. Don't try to lift any more drums of cleaning liquid. You can get up and go home." What good news that was. What a change came over me. My paralysis, expressed in weakness and depression, left almost immediately. I changed my thinking. I got up. I was OK.

Proverbs has a verse for this in the 23rd chapter: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he!"

FEAR

There are those times when we paralyze ourselves with fear. We walk around with fears of rejection and inadequacy. We try so hard to figure out what others want us to be and to do in order not to feel rejected by them.

And what a fearful way to live! Many of us learned early in childhood to please others so they won't reject us. We feel we have to earn the right to be loved and accepted. We learn that early and then we spend the rest of our lives looking around to find someone to please, and some of us never get good enough to feel accepted fully by anybody. We're always trying, thinking we can only be accepted when we are perfect. In the world of the theater the saying goes that you're only as good as your last show. The next one will have to be just as good or better, or you just are not good enough! What a way to live.

By the way, when were you last "perfect"? Can you remember? We wear masks to hide our real feelings ~~and our needs to cover over our feelings of rejection. We cover our real feelings.~~ We say to ourselves, "What would people think if they really knew how I felt?" And so we put up this big front. We block or paralyze who we are in order to feel safe with others and we end up with our headaches and our stomachaches and our backaches. Our rejection fear attacks the weakest part of our body. But Jesus says to us today - as he said to the paralytic - "your sins, friend, are forgiven....you're making yourself sick with those fears".

You may have done something wrong. But who hasn't. Your ideas or your way of life may not suit any others, but yourself. You're OK. God loves you. He accepts you. Love and accept yourself. Pick up your bed and walk.

What are your major fears? Is it the future? The recession? Are you unemployed, or afraid you will be? Are you about to retire and afraid and uncertain

of what you will do with the rest of your life? Are you afraid of illness? Or death. Is it possible we are letting our fears of the future paralyze our living in the present so that we do not really live now? You know, there's more than one way to commit suicide: just not live in the present - live only in the future or in the past.

Think now of your greatest fear...whatever it is. Don't be afraid of it. Remember the word of the angel to the shepherds at Bethlehem: "Fear not. I bring you good tidings". Good news.

Angie Dickinson whom most of us enjoy Friday evenings at ten o'clock on Police Woman was on the Merve Griffin show three weeks ago. Not only did she look lovely, but she made a thoughtful, lovely contribution to the panel. Quoting what someone had said to her when she was starting her career, she shared it with the listening audience. It went something like this: "Fear knocked at the door. Faith opened it. And nobody was there".

ANGER Not only do we paralyze ourselves with fear, but also with anger. I think that anger held in or unexpressed can clearly poison or paralyze. On the other hand, anger that is constantly expressed is a cancer that eats away at our health thus becoming a life pattern of estrangement.

I grew up with the injunction never to express anger which, in turn was affirmed and encouraged by my profession as a pastor. After all, there are those who feel it is unbecoming of a pastor to be angry. Have you ever seen me angry? Irritated, yes. Provoked, perhaps. But angry? Annoyed, maybe. Chances are that my wife and children are the only ones who have ever seen me really angry. I suppressed anger for so many years that I didn't recognize the feeling when I had it. And the first time my wife and I lost our tempers and got angry with each other....well, I guess I felt the marriage was coming to an end. I think that anger withheld turns to resentment and inner paralysis. That's not healthy. Nor is the other extreme. That can be just as paralyzing. Some people pride themselves in saying that they never let their anger remain bottled up. "I speak the truth in love". You may hear the truth, but often you don't hear the love. "I always let it out" they'll tell you. Well, this kind of thinking and living can lead to high blood pressures and a stroke.

Do you recall the "good news" that Jesus announced about anger? He said that if you have a cause against somebody, if you're really angry with them, and you start to church or to the temple to worship - hold up, go find the person you're concerned with and set things right. And then come back to worship. One man asked, "Lord, how many times shall we forgive another?" "Seven times". Jesus replied, "Seventy-times-seven".

How do you handle your anger? Do you paralyze yourself with it? Your sins are forgiven. Take up your bed. Walk.

GUILT Fear. Anger. What about guilt. Let's consider the possibilities of paralysis that stems from guilt.

There are two kinds of guilt: a realistic guilt which results from actually "doing somebody in" - really doing harm to another. Remember Peter denied Jesus three times. Judas betrayed him. All of the disciples were guilty when they fled and left Him. But Jesus did not condemn them. He said, "Your sins are forgiven". And He made Peter the head man of the early Church and all of His

disciples, except Judas, became powerful instruments for his healing ministry. They did not paralyze themselves by what they had done. They heard the good news and became new persons. So where we are guilty for evil or harm done, we are still accepted when we rectify the evil.

The second kind of guilt is the neurotic guilt, manifest in what we call "guilt feelings". We all have them at times. Usually they stem from the imposed man made judgements and standards. You know how it starts: a child does something naughty, and his mother says, "Johnny...now aren't you ashamed of yourself?" We feel we can control people by making them feel guilty and so parents impose cultural or religious standards which can produce those inner feelings of guilt: about drinking, about smoking, about sex...even about considering one's own needs, many of which they will tell us are wrong.

I grew up in a home and a culture that taught that wasting time was wrong, and to this day I have difficulty in playing and enjoying myself and relaxing unless I earn it by working hard enough to get over ~~the guilty feelings~~. neurotic guilt ^{my} feelings.

This kind of neurotic guilt can be imposed in times of tragedy. In a church in which I grew up, a son of one of the members died of polio at about five years of age. At that time, they thought perhaps the polio germ was carried by the housefly, so in guilt, this man carried a fly-swatter around for a whole year, killing flies wherever he was, blaming himself for letting the flies into his home.

CLOSING This past week St. James Episcopal Church of our own city has been conducting a healing mission. A number of clergy from the neighborhood came together on Wednesday for lunch and to hear Mrs. Neale, the leader of the mission speak. I appreciated what she had to say. She spoke of the need for love in our lives...for letting God's spirit truly fill our lives. She spoke of how when we come together in His name, there is this power in us that is greater than any of us. When we come to worship in a congregation like this, or when we gather in small groups, the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and somehow beyond anything we ever do, there is a presence and a power - it can heal our paralyzed lives. I believe it. I know some of you do, too.

Will you join me as we close our eyes and bow our heads, and ask ourselves how we paralyze ourselves now? Is it in fear Or anger? Or guilt? Or grief? What is my method of keeping myself from living...living fully. As we bow our heads in prayer will you say, under your breath, these words after I say them:

"My sins are forgiven. God knows me and he still loves me. I realize I can be loved no matter what. I don't have to try too hard anymore to please - God knows who. I don't have to feel guilty about not being perfect. I will take up my bed and walk".

Amen