

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity Eph. 4: 17ff.

Matt. 9:1-9

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

There are times when a room is more than just space and a seemingly passing encounter turns out to bear far more for us than initial appearances would suggest. Have you ever come here on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening expecting nothing beyond what you usually get only to experience in words, prayers, actions, or conversations, a deep and revealing event that alters the direction of your thinking or your life? Sometimes a simple room like this one becomes a nave with a sanctuary; that is, a place where the holy breaks through and transforms the way you see and relate to things and people around you. It is like going for a quiet walk on a fall morning amidst the coolness and the color of nature, and at some point you realize this is not simply about getting exercise or a bit of silence, but as you move the beauty of the gift of your life suddenly explodes into awareness. It is like learning in your heart and soul that today, this moment, carries within it the beginning of the rest of your life. It is an awakening to the holy in life. It may be on just such a walk, or in your living room conversing with a friend or family member, or even in this worship space, but where ever it transpires the place becomes more than just a space in time—it becomes a sanctuary; a holy moment filled with life. Sometimes a room is more than just a room, and a conversation more than filling time.

The people in our Gospel lesson today came to Jesus with set expectations, too. Maybe they thought there would be some teaching or commentary, and given his past actions even a healing. They did get that, BUT they got much more than they anticipated; they were encountered with the real meaning of life and their relationship with God was changed completely and forever. What they had heard and been taught about the ways of God got a quick revision. In Christ, God has a way of doing remarkable and unforeseen things that transform us. Sometimes a word from Jesus is more than just a conversation.

This story, which has parallels in Mark and Luke, tells us that Jesus had come home to Capernaum; to his home. The event certainly gives a new meaning to the phrase we often use in asking people to come and see us; “Just drop in anytime”, we say. According to Mark’s version that is exactly what they did. Since the paralytic’s friends could not get into the house by the front door, they moved to the roof where they literally (according to the Greek) dug through the clay and wood to get access to the living room. Imagine us in the middle of the liturgy having the ceiling start to fall around the altar or choir, only to have someone on a stretcher lowered down to join the proceedings!! I suppose it is a way to get a new roof on the Church.

Now, following the surprise entrance, things get down to serious business. And with each engagement we take steps deeper and deeper into the ways of God where our reckonings of how things are or should be are transformed into God’s way. This man, paralyzed and confined, comes face to face with Jesus, who simply says, “Take heart, your sins are forgiven.” Nothing is asked of him; no inquiry into his state of mind or heart—merely the pronouncement of forgiveness, and later the command to get up and walk. This is the surface of the story, because there is much more and that ‘more’ is what makes this room more than a room. It becomes a sanctuary; a place of transformation. The scribes, defenders of Israel’s piety and ritual call this blasphemy, not only

because only God can forgive and thus Jesus is being equated with God, but he has upset the norm. By all tradition this man should have done penance, acknowledged his sinfulness, offered some sacrifice, and THEN God would forgive him. Confession and sacrifice preceded and even merited forgiveness, and none of this was talked about, so forgiveness had been offered too soon. Jesus' contemporaries believed sin had consequences for health and wholeness, and rightfully so. I have known people to carry around so much guilt and regret over failures of action and heart, that they literally bear the wounds in their bodies. But the scribes failure was to believe that only if people could get their act together first, would God accept and forgive them. Jesus reversed the order and forgiveness and penance changed places. I wonder how many folks in that room grasped what a revolutionary moment they were invited into? Look at the parable of the Prodigal Son if you really want to "get it". In some ways real repentance and reparation is only possible if we first hear, know, and trust that we are forgiven. In fact, it may be that true that only when we feel the embrace of God's grace in Christ will we really be free enough to see the full depth of our sin and finally lay it before God openly, because we know that we will not be condemned. Consider for a moment your own relationships, and the degree of transparency that you allow yourself to bring to those. The higher the risks, the less open we generally are inclined to be. BUT the more we are assured of being heard and accepted, the more we can be who we really are with others. **This is absolutely vital.** Without assurance of grace we will hide our brokenness and sins (as if we could hide them from God), but even worse continue to carry guilt and weight of never being enough before God or one another. Do you see what happened in that room? It became a sanctuary—a place to encounter the holiness of God, which is felt most deeply in His compassion, and seen even more deeply in His Son, Jesus, whose suffering on the cross was with arms wide open to embrace and take on sin and those in bondage to it.

There is one more level in this descent into God's transforming forgiveness. It is in the question, "Which is easier; to say your sins are forgiven, or Rise and walk?" The truth is both are tough. In our time with so much in the way of medical advancement healing of the body has become commonplace. But we know full well that there is an interplay and connection between the soul and the body, and perhaps many of us suffer unwittingly from hanging on to guilt or anger or jealousy or hatred. One mistake that could be made in hearing this text is to catch only the phrase—"Your sins are forgiven" and then ignore the words "So that you may know the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins" and the command to "Rise and walk". Those last words are a reminder to us that if forgiveness is an unmerited gift that precedes all that we can do, once received it also calls us to a transformed life; to lives lived under the authority of the Son who calls us to not continue to walk in darkness or with the burden of guilt or to believe that forgiveness is a license to do as we please. WE are called to ask what spaces in our lives, what rooms do we inhabit, that now came become sanctuaries—spaces for God to exist in us. Amen+