

Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year B
(Feb. 19, 2006)

Dancing Our Way into Heaven

Faith, sin, forgiveness. These are all themes in our readings today.

The gospel story presents us with the most dramatic scene we have witnessed up to this point in Mark's gospel. Jesus is at home in Capernaum, teaching crowds of people, so many it's impossible to get near him; suddenly those in the house must have been astonished to see a mattress coming down from the ceiling with a paralyzed man lying on it. He and his friends must have been desperate to get near Jesus and this was the only way they could do it. Indeed the man was very fortunate to have such friends. Their love for him as well as their faith in Jesus led them to this rather inventive way of getting close to Jesus when the crowds were preventing it.

Jesus seems astonished by their faith, and he says to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven." But that is not what they had come to hear. They were not looking for forgiveness, for spiritual healing. They were looking for physical healing. But Jesus, it seems to me, wants to teach them and all the others present – and us as well – a lesson, a very simple lesson: spiritual healing is much more important than physical healing. It was far more important for the man's sins to be forgiven than for him to be able to walk.

Now Mark tells us that some of the Scribes who were there were scandalized by this, thinking Jesus had blasphemed, because in their scheme of things, only God could forgive sins. Moreover they thought that forgiveness was not something that came in this life. It was something to hope for in the future. For them no one could ever be sure that they were forgiven.

The Christian community, however, those for whom Mark was writing as well as Paul and the other New Testament authors, were convinced that forgiveness had already happened through faith in Jesus. Indeed to the early followers of Jesus, the sin-forgiving power Jesus displays here is intrinsic to the experience of being a Christian. Belief means forgiveness of sins. In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, we read,

“To him (Jesus) all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

This is the “something new” that God refers to speaking through the prophet Isaiah, in our first reading: that forgiveness has already happened even before it was asked for. “It was I,” God says, “who wiped out your offenses. Your sins I remember no more.” It’s the lesson Jesus teaches in the parable of the Prodigal Son, forgiven by his father before he even asks for forgiveness.

It’s also a lesson that many people find difficult to grasp. How often have I heard people say, “How can God forgive me? My sins are so great?” What we sometimes do not understand is that God’s love and forgiveness are much, much greater than our sins. Maybe what people who feel that way are really struggling with is forgiving themselves. Many Catholics have grown up with the notion of a God who is a stern, relentless task-master, more interested in what we’ve done that was wrong than in loving us and forgiving us. But this is not what scripture tells us and this is not what the best Christian tradition teaches.

Every once in a while I’ll hear someone say, “Since the Second Vatican Council, we’ve paid too much attention to love. It’s all love, love, love, and nothing about what God demands of us or how we will be punished if we don’t do what we’re told to do.”

Well, I’m not sure just how accurate that is. We certainly needed to move from an overly legalistic approach to God, Church, and religion and remind ourselves of what is obviously more important in Scripture – and that really is the love of God: love of God in two senses – God’s immense and overwhelming love for us and our love for God, which includes of course our love for one another. It’s the love that will impel us to do the things that God has asked us to do. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” So it’s right to emphasize God’s love – but it’s also right to show the connection between that love and doing what God wants us to do, not just from fear of being punished but because we want to please God. Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict, has just published his first encyclical letter and it’s all about love. He talks about the very connection that I just made between God’s love for us, our love for God, our love for one another, and doing what God wants us to do.

There are a couple of other important messages for us in today’s

scripture. There is that connection between faith and forgiveness. Mark tells us that it was when Jesus saw the faith of the people who brought the paralytic that he was moved to heal him – the faith of his friends, not just that of the paralyzed man. And perhaps this should tell us what can happen when we pray and act together out of faith, that our community faith can be powerful enough to accomplish miracles, something that we could not do by ourselves.

And then there is forgiveness. The Christian tradition teaches that forgiveness is not just God's prerogative, but ours as well. We can all forgive. Indeed Jesus tells us to forgive and teaches us to pray, "Forgive us as we forgive others." And when he tells his disciples, "Whose sins you shall forgive they are forgiven," he is not just talking to the disciples, he is talking to all of us as well. Jesus gives each and every one of us a share in God's forgiving power.

And just consider what happens when this kind of forgiveness occurs: the paralytic in the story got up and walked. I imagine he did not just walk, he jumped for joy, he ran and grabbed the nearest partner and started one of those wonderful Jewish dances that soon had everyone singing and swaying and dancing together. I often think it's a wonderful image of the Kingdom of God and of what we should be as a Christian community.

The great lesson for me today is that when, first as individuals, then as a community, we express our faith, and when, together, we experience forgiveness, God's forgiveness of us and our forgiveness of one another, then miracles can happen. So let's join our hands in faith; let's forgive one another as God has forgiven us – and let's dance! Let's dance our way into heaven!