

The collect this morning makes two statements. The first asserts that we cannot please God on our own, but that only with God are we able to please Him. We must have God in our lives, we must be in relationship with Him for God to delight in us. Without relationship with Him, all of our actions, outwardly good or not, have a root of self-centeredness. If we have not submitted to God, then we presume ourselves to be God.

The second statement of the collect petitions God that He would guide and govern our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Once we are in relationship with God, He then works in us over time to remove the confusions of our fallenness from our thoughts and to re-shape our desires so that we would pursue holiness. And through holy living, we then create beauty in our churches, our families, and in the world. This is what truly pleases God, that we image Him. He is the original Creator, and we as His children follow Him in the task of creation and beauty. He Created *ex nihilo* – out of nothing. We create with the gifts that He graciously bestows upon us.

Therefore today's collect pictures for us the concept of renewal. We the followers and family of Jesus have moved from a posture of inability to please God, to being able to please Him. And of course this work is not finished in us, but it has objectively begun – for we are objectively made members of God in baptism – and it continues as we are perfected. We are progressing towards deeper love and deeper relationship with God.

Today's gospel lesson dramatically portrays this movement for us. First we note that the man's friends brought the paralyzed man - the one sick of the palsy – to Jesus. We know little of these men who brought their friend on a cot or stretcher of some type, but the text says, "Jesus, seeing their faith.... " What type of faith was this? We have no description except the obvious. These men believed that Jesus could make their paralyzed friend well. They had heard of others who had been healed by Him and the thought then came into their minds, "If Jesus can heal other people, then He surely can heal our friend." Hope bloomed in their lives where it had previously been non-existent. It seemed that God had visited His people for there had not been a prophet, teacher, or healer like this in Israel for centuries. Yet the things they had heard about this man. Could He not be the messiah? We must take our friend to meet this man Jesus and to plead that He would heal him.

No doubt that when Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “Son be of good cheer, thy sins be forgiven thee,” these men, and especially the palsied man, were disappointed. They had come for healing, not that this man's sins would be forgiven. Besides, he was unable to walk – how could he have done something sinful? He could barely do anything at all.

There are quite a few points to highlight here. First, the Bible consistently connects spiritual and physical healing. Our bodies and souls are united, inseparable without death. Traumatic events leave emotional scars and make neural connections that last long after the original trauma is passed. And our sin nature, our original fallenness, also keeps us from being healed. Our understanding about God and about the world and about ourselves is faulty. Yet we convince ourselves that we are just fine even as we understand at a deep level that there is a restlessness, a gnawing suspicion, that we are not fine, that we are just keeping up appearances.

Spiritual healing is connected to physical healing – not in any automatic way, but in a wholistic way. The Jewish concept of Shalom refers to the peace and wholeness of the entire person, and this is what we desire – that we would be close to God and therefore our spiritual health would encourage habits that would keep us physically healthy. So Jesus starts with healing the inner man. “Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee,” is typically the first step to, “Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.”

Now certainly, the friends and the man himself were probably disappointed that Christ did not immediately heal him. Yet God had greater plans than just healing this man physically. God used the healing of this paralyzed man for the greater glory of demonstrating that Christ was God, to the stubborn unbelievers who were witnessing this interaction. “And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth.” They knew that only God could forgive offenses against God, and therefore Jesus, who was in their minds only a man, was wrongly claiming that He was God. Of course what they refused to acknowledge through their hard hearts was that there was no unrighteousness here. Jesus claimed that which He was. And of course it is easier to say to someone, “Your sins are forgiven you,” because we are unable to see any immediate external evidence of such a statement. Yet we can readily see if someone who we know to have been ill or injured is healed. Likewise we can readily detect who healed them in such a miraculous case as this.

Jesus here shows definitively that He has the power both to forgive our sins and to heal our bodies. In other words, the restoration, the renewal, of our being is found in Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ only. We are unable to come to Jesus on our own; but God, in His steadfast mercy and abundant grace, reaches out to us through Word and Spirit to bring us to Him. Only in Jesus are we renewed in mind, body, and spirit. Only in Jesus can we become what we were meant to be, the blessed stewards of God's creation, bringing restoration to the world that is, and to the world that is to come.

What St. Matthew describes narratively in the ninth chapter of his gospel, St. Paul describes theologically in Ephesians 4. We see in our reading from that chapter that the heart of natural man is blind – it cannot see the Truth. It cannot comprehend the Truth. It cannot comprehend Jesus. The things of God make no sense to one who is alienated from the life of God. We see that the understanding of such a person is darkened and that he pursues vanity, is thrilled by things that really make no ultimate difference. Now there are many innocent diversions in this life, but those relatively minor amusements become the focus of existence for people who do not have God, and of course these things cannot ultimately satisfy the soul. St. Paul says that such people are past feeling and have given themselves over to work all uncleanness with greediness. In other words, they lose the ability to empathize with others, they are locked into seeing the world as if they were the center of it all, and they manipulate others to get what they desire even at a detriment to their friends or families.

But we have not so learned Christ. By God's grace, our hearts have been unblinded, our spiritual paralysis has been healed. We now walk with God. St. Paul says that we have received the preaching of the Word, we have been taught in Jesus and of Jesus. We no longer live as if we were the center of everything, for we know that Jesus is the center, and therefore we know that we are to please Him above all. We have been renewed in our minds, our thinking is illuminated and no longer darkened, so that we can discern the Truth and live according to our regenerate natures in righteousness and holiness. Paul states these actions as things which have been accomplished in us by God, and therefore there is an objective renewal that we have experienced. God has changed us in a nascent way so that now in Christ, we can and must mature what has been renewed.

How then do we incarnate and manifest forth what God has done to us on the inside? What must we do to demonstrate that yes, our sins have been forgiven us? Well, we must arise, take up our bed, and walk. The follower of Christ is not just one who believes inwardly, but must take up the challenge to believe outwardly as well. We must live out in our behavior and actions what we profess in our minds and with our mouths. This is the hard part, but putting our faith into practice is the means by which our faith is matured.

The Apostle gets very practical here. First, we are commended to speak the truth. Now, of course, we know we should do this. Our parents teach us this from our earliest age. But in our world, lies have become the norm. What lies? How about, "Boys can be girls"? How about, "Israel is to blame for the violence it has received"? How about, "We the political left (or the political right) can solve your problems if you just give us power"? Lies are all around us, and it is difficult to sort through the fact and the narrative. Speaking the truth will get you cancelled or berated. Try telling someone that it is sin for a man and a woman to have sexual relations outside of marriage. And yet speaking the truth in love is critical for a community to really be healthy and united. We are indeed members of one another.

Speaking the truth makes people angry; St. Paul follows his direction to speak truthfully with instruction about anger. Maybe there is a righteousness that we can maintain even when angry? Jesus certainly showed such holy anger. But we are warned not to let our anger turn into selfish indignation. "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil." We are not to hold on to our anger, for we can justify any sinful behavior in it. The devil loves to keep us angry and self-righteous. We exalt ourself through contempt of those others, and our anger causes us to justify sin. The angry man is not a rational man. Our anger is addictive. We love to be right and to let others know when they are in the wrong. Yet man's anger does not bring about God's righteousness.

St. Paul also commends us to work and to earn our own way in honesty and diligence. Not only that, but we are to be generous with what we have earned. We are blessed in this parish with individuals who know how to work and know the character formation that comes from work. But yet still all of us will be needy at some point in our lives. It is our job to take care of our own. We must step up to these challenges as they arise. Are there needy individuals outside of our congregation? No doubt. We must step up to those challenges as they arise as

well, but with wisdom and discretion so that we are good stewards of that with which we have been entrusted, but step up to the challenge we must. Generosity is no easy task, but all things come from God and of His own do we return to Him through our generosity.

The renewed man, therefore, has left aside his old greediness and corruption and has intentionally taken up the character of Christ. Such a person has integrity. He seeks justice tempered with mercy. He works diligently to meet his own needs, while anticipating the needs of others, knowing that he may one day himself be needy. The renewed person speaks grace and peace into a world full of bitterness and anger and malice and arrogance. The renewed person brings love to his brothers and sisters in Christ and brings Christ to a world that rejects Him. The renewed person forgives, for he has been forgiven. He knows that his goodness and righteousness is only from Christ.

But how then, does the renewed man live in an insane world? I suspect that you all, like me, have noticed that the world is falling apart. There is no peace out there to be found, there is instead strife and hatred and killing and confusion. It overwhelms us. It is tempting to throw our hands up and bolt for the hills, hiding until it all passes by.

This, however, is not our lot. This is not our calling. In the power of Christ, to the glory of the Father, and by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are to breathe life into the world – the same life that has been breathed into us. God can change our world – His love conquered the Roman empire, His love can conquer our world. Are we to take upon us this incredible task? Yes and no. Yes, we will work for peace and justice and that all men will know the love of God. But no, we cannot in our own efforts force change. We must simply pray that God would renew the culture and then work and obey as God calls us to work and obey.

Importantly – change begins with you. You might not be able to change the county political machine, or the national press, or the company formerly known as Twitter, but you can change yourself. We might not be able to end the war in Ukraine or the war in Israel, nor fix the Cuban government, but we can love each other here and reach out in love to our neighbors now. We are renewed in Christ, we are being renewed in Christ, and we will one day no longer need further renewal, for we will enjoy the perfection of eternal fellowship with God in our own bodies. Let us understand therefore, that eternal blessedness begins

right here and right now.

Let us today leave behind our palsy. Let us understand that changing the world begins with changing ourselves, taking up the renewed lives given us in Christ. Salvation begins in the house of God, and we are all members of that house. Begin here. Let us therefore hear and take to heart the words of our Savior for He is speaking to us. "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. Arise, take up thy bed, and go in peace unto thy house." Our sins are forgiven. We are renewed in Christ. Take that renewal into the world.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.