

When you were a child and you came home from church, did your grandmother or perhaps your parents ask you what the scripture readings were about. Let's say you leave church today, and go home or go out with friends and someone asks you what were the readings in church about today? What would you say? Any offers? Well, you could say that they all mentioned sin. Sin is all over the place in our readings.

In Isaiah, we have a reference to Israel's time in exile after they escaped from Egypt. God says "You have not bought me sweet cane with money or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. You have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. In the Psalms, the songs of David, we hear "Then, I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord', and you forgave the guilt of my sin.'

The gospel story is about a paralyzed man who is brought to Jesus. The friends, who bring him, have to go up on the roof, dig through it, and lower him down to get him to Jesus. Jesus sees the faith of the friends and tells the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven". And after the scribes worry about whether Jesus can forgive sins or not, Jesus tell the man to "Stand up, take your mat and go to your home" and he does.

Sin – it is not something we like to think about. We know we sin. We ask forgiveness. We sin again. However, the theme of the readings is not just about sin, it is about the forgiveness of sin – God's forgetting of our sin – our healing – God's desire for us to be whole. The Isaiah passage ends with – I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. God has forgiven Israel. In the psalm, God forgives the guilt of the psalmist's sin. In the story of the paralyzed man, his sins are forgiven and his paralysis healed. He is made whole. The message is that God can make us whole too. God forgives and forgets our sins. However, we have become so familiar with God forgiving our sins, that I don't know if we really "get" that God forgives us and that we are made clean and new.

I think we have a tendency to hold on to our sins – to keep them with us. I love the story that a woman wrote about going to confession. She said that she carefully wrote out all her sins so that she would not forget them. When she got to her confessor, she said the opening words of the rite of reconciliation and when she got to the part about naming her sins, she read them all out and received absolution. She was about to put the list back in her pocketbook when her confessor told her to hand the list over. You see she wanted to have them for next time so she wouldn't have to write them out again, but her confessor reminded her that that's not how God's forgiveness works. Those sins were gone. I think that many of us keep holding on to our sins, and do not let God lift them from our hearts. We feel guilty about them. We let them weigh us down. We think we are bad people – never making the mark. We know what we have done and we are probably going to do them again.

Once a month I go to something called Fresh Start, which is for clergy in new positions – kind of a support group at the start of a new ministry. A few months ago, we did an interesting exercise that has stayed with me. The leader asked to think about what gets in the way of accepting our belovedness. What gets in the way of accepting that we are loved by God and that God forgives all our sins? Then he asked us what those things were, so he could write them up on his poster board. Once we had figured out some non-specific words to describe what gets in the way of accepting our belovedness, we started talking. We said things like "feeling unworthy, wanting to be in control, letting fear rule our lives, feeling guilty, believing what the culture says about us, letting other things be our God and letting competition or peer pressure control our actions". We soon filled the sheet. Then the leader drew a cross on the sheet – one that took up the whole sheet – a cross that covered all those reasons that got in the way of us accepting our belovedness.

It was the cross, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ that could take away all those sins. It was a simple thing and yet I found it very powerful. I could see the power of the cross. The cross removes and lifts away all that all the gets in the way of us accepting God's forgiveness and love. These things, that keep us from accepting that we are the beloved of God, prevent God from fully working in us. By holding on to our feelings of unworthiness, our guilt, our need to be in control, we hold ourselves away from God. Whatever separates us from God is sin.

Holding on to the things which weigh us down is a sort of paralysis. If we don't believe we are the beloved children of God, we are not able to act as the beloved children of God. We become like the paralyzed man. We allow our despair, our failings and our insecurities to keep us on our mat. We think we aren't good enough or strong enough.

But God keeps on calling, and sometimes it is not just up to us. Sometimes, our friends get involved and pick up our mat and help us hear the call. Sometimes our friends have to drag us up on a roof, dig a hole through it, and lower us down to get us to hear God's voice telling us how much we are loved. God is telling us that whatever weighs us down and holds us back is removed by the grace of God.

Henry Nouwen in this excerpt from Life of the Beloved puts God's message to us very well. *"I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. ... I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child."*

This is who we are - God's beloved. In our baptism, God tells us that we are his beloved. Every Sunday as we share the body and blood of Christ around this table, God is telling us that we are his beloved people. Jesus has freed us. The cross has been put over all our sins and it is time to start anew. Jesus says to all of us who are in need of healing, in need of redemption, in need of forgiveness, – Your sins are forgiven. Take up you mat and walk.

In a little while we are going to have a baptism. Amelia Patricia is going to be baptized and her god-parents and parents are going to make vows on her behalf.

We are going to renew our baptismal vows. As we make these vows, we are saying, God, I believe I am forgiven and that I am your beloved. We are responding in love to God's invitation. We are responding to "Take up you mat and walk" by promising to go and do God's work in the world – not by ourselves – but with God's help. Go forth you people, the beloved of God.

Isaiah 43:18-25

¹⁸Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

¹⁹I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. ²²Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! ²³You have not brought me your sheep for burnt-offerings, or honoured me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings,

or wearied you with frankincense. ²⁴You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins you have wearied me with your iniquities. ²⁵I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

Psalm 32

Of David. A Maskil. ¹Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,

whose sin is covered. ²Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord', and you forgave the guilt of

my sin.⁶Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress,⁷ the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them.
⁷You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.
⁸I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

Mark 2:1-12

²When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. ²So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. ³Then some people³ came, bringing to him a paralysed man, carried by four of them. ⁴And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. ⁵When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' ⁶Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ⁷'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' ⁸At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? ⁹Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? ¹⁰But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— ¹¹'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' ¹²And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'