Letting the Word Go to All the Trouble and Take the Trouble

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We have a way of saying about someone that he goes to all the trouble, or, in another connection, that he takes the trouble. By way of a pun, we might say the same two things about the Word of God: it goes to all the trouble and it takes all the trouble.

Better yet, since the Word of God is finally a person, *He* goes to all the trouble and *He* takes all the trouble. And it is only by letting Him do these two things through the Word of Scripture that we can keep the Word of God relevant.

But let's not talk *about* keeping the Word relevant. By actual experiment let's try our hand *at* keeping it relevant. By employing the two ground rules just mentioned, let's put the relevance of the Word into specific practice.

The specific word of Scripture selected for an experiment is the Gospel for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, Matthew 9:1-8. By firsthand investigation let's see how the Word in that case goes to all the trouble and takes all the trouble. Open your Bibles, please, to Mathew 9, verses 1 to 8, and read them.

Now, then, our two ground rules correspond, in the language of the Lutheran Confessions, to the Law and the Gospel. If the Word of God is to be relevant, then it is that Word as *Law* which goes to all the trouble. The Law is the Word of God that diagnoses the trouble for what it is.

Accordingly, we begin by asking: “Just what, in this passage of Scripture, is all the trouble?” This is a good way to begin any study of Scripture, whether it be in a Bible class or in your own understanding—that is, in your *standing under*—the Word of God. In every case the first question to direct to the text is: “What is the problem? What is the trouble to which the Word is here going?”

To say even this much assumes something about the nature of Holy Scripture. It assumes that Scripture is essentially trouble-shooting literature, literature which is oriented to people’s problems. Scripture begins with the needs of flesh-and-blood human beings.

Offhand, the only exceptions in Scripture which come to mind are the doxological passages. But Biblical material—in general—whether in the Law and the Prophets, the Psalms, the Gospels, the Epistles, or even in the historical material of the Book of Acts— is concerned with the living needs of living human beings, then and now. So, in order for us (as we used to say in seminary) to “crack the text,” in order for the text to break open and divulge its meaning, we must come to grips with the specific problem with which the text is dealing.

What, according to the text, is the trouble at hand? That is the Law question. With reference to the Gospel lesson in Matthew 9, “What is the human trouble described in this text?” We can say it very briefly and at first only tentatively. We can say what the trouble seems to be—but only seems to be. At first glance the trouble appears to be this, that the Pharisees thought Jesus was a blasphemer. The trouble apparently was that they denied Jesus had authority to forgive sins. As they would say, and say rightly, “Who can forgive sins but God only?” Therefore their trouble seems to have been that they denied Jesus’ power to forgive sins because they denied, first of all, that Jesus was

God.

But is this their worst problem? Is this their root trouble? According to the text, is this all the trouble there was and is? Offhand it might seem so. But let's look again. Let's look again by asking, "Is this the trouble with us?" Apparently not. If not, the text seemingly lacks relevance for us. So we'd better take a second look. If that is *not* our trouble, if our problem is *not* that we deny Jesus' divine authority, then can it still be the basic problem with the Pharisees in this text?

Frankly, I don't find you saying and you don't find me saying and we don't find most of our young people saying, "We doubt that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins." More than likely they and we would say, "Why of course He has authority to forgive sins, for, after all, He is God." On the other hand, it may be that we have missed something in the text. It may be that we haven't let the Word go to all the trouble after all. Perhaps we have prevented this Gospel lesson not only from going to all of the trouble, but also from going to all the trouble of the scribes and Pharisees.

That, indeed, is what we have done. We have underdiagnosed the trouble with which our Lord is really dealing. If the scribes' trouble is not ours, then maybe we have been wrong in the first place in saying what all *their* trouble was. So let's take a closer look at Jesus' diagnosis. The trouble with the scribes lay even deeper than they had imaged it did. It lay so deep—as it always does—that only the Word of God Himself, in His unsparing judgment, is able to expose it.

The trouble, as the scribes saw it, was this: Jesus was claiming to do what only God can do. Now if that had been all there was to the scribes' trouble, Jesus could have met the situation simply by insisting, "I *am* God." But Jesus went farther. The

whole trouble was this: The scribes doubted that God, however forgiving He might be up in heaven, *would ever authorize anyone to forgive sins down on earth, among men*.

Life on earth, where men must do their living, is not usually a matter of forgiveness. On earth it is a matter of following or breaking God's commandments, and men must live by these commandments or die by them. This is the way God has ordered life among men on earth, we usually think, and no one, not even God, will change that order into something so different as forgiveness. Forgiveness there may be, but in the kingdom of heaven—a very spiritual, unearthly kind of forgiveness.

Yes, the scribes did doubt that Jesus was the Son of God, but why did they doubt that? Merely because He claimed to be doing what only God could do? Worse than that, He claimed to be doing what God Himself would *not* do—bring forgiveness down to earth, among human beings. If God Himself would not do that, much less would He authorize anyone else to do that. This is why the scribes thought Jesus' saying was blasphemy.

Now, of course, a man can utter those words; he can make the sounds. But when he says the words, nothing really happens. Obviously not, for just look, the paralytic still bore the earthly mark of his sin, his paralysis. And no wonder, for no one—neither Jesus nor God Himself—had really loosed this man from his sin or from the medical results of his sin. So Jesus was not to be believed. But that was exactly the trouble—*all* the trouble. The Son of Man and His men did and still do have the authority to forgive sins, such that when they say, "Your sins are forgiven," something really does happen, both in heaven and on earth. The trouble is that this is what people refuse to believe.

So let's say it all over once more. Our first attempt to let the

Word go to all the trouble was too superficial. We underdiagnosed the scribes' real problem and ours along with it. This is often the case with first reading of Scripture. Scripture, as our Lord says, is to be *searched*, not browsed.

What we might say for the people in the text, even at this superficial level, is that it is to their credit that they still had the capacity to be offended by blasphemy. Our age seems pretty well to have lost that capacity. Nowadays if a man were to come along and say, "Your sins are forgiven," we might merely refuse to take him seriously; I doubt that we would be scandalized. The scribes, however, were still able to be shocked by a man who pretended to do what only God can do, and they were shocked enough to crucify Him.

A New Order

Still, if that had been the extent of their trouble, then, I repeat, we would expect Jesus to have given them a very different answer from the one He did give them. He did not say to them: "You're right, only God can forgive sins, but you're wrong in thinking I am not God, for, as a matter of fact, I am." He did not take that tack at all. Instead, He said, in effect: "Your trouble is not that you so fervently believe that only God can forgive sins. Of course, only God can. But actually, what you doubt is that this same God, who alone can forgive sins, would ever condescend to share His unique authority with men, with people like you and me. What you doubt is that God would authorize anyone to replace His whole order on earth, the order of His law, with a whole new order, an order of forgiveness."

Now if that was the trouble—all the trouble—with the scribes in this text, then let me repeat my earlier question, Is the scribes' trouble, as we've redefined it, also our trouble? If so, then Jesus' diagnosis of them is *relevant* as a diagnosis of

us. As I said before, you and I and the youth or adults with whom we work do not have any great trouble believing that Jesus is empowered to forgive sins. Why don't we? Because we know that anyone who is God has the power to forgive sins. And if there is anything we are sure of in the case of Jesus, it is that He is God. Our problem too, is that we find it hard to believe that God would ever forgive sins in the very human, down-to-earth way He did in the Son of Man.

What we have done so far in letting this Word of God go to all the trouble suggests a principle for Bible study in general. In seeking to diagnose the trouble which is present in a given Biblical text, we ought not begin with something less than the text itself. We ought not begin, for example, with our own general observations on human trouble, for those observations will themselves, in most cases, be something less than the text. Then we shall see only so much trouble in the text as we ourselves have the capacity to see in life generally. Why not go to all the trouble, as the Word itself does, and begin with that?

Ground Rule No. 1

Summing up, then: Ground rule Number One for keeping the Word of God relevant is to let the text go to the trouble, but to all the trouble, in all the depth in which the Word itself scrutinizes that trouble—or better, as the Word *Himself* scrutinizes that trouble. That is letting the Word be relevant by letting it operate as the Word of Law.

Part Two: Taking the Trouble—that is the second ground rule for letting the Word be relevant. Letting the Word of God take all the trouble is to let it be the Gospel. And that is exactly what the Son of Man's authority upon earth is to this day: to take the trouble, to take it upon Himself, to take it away. Those

phrases may seem at first to be puns of my own making. They are not, really. To say that the Son of Man quite literally “takes” the trouble is to say only what St. Matthew himself says in the chapter immediately preceding our present Gospel lesson. At this point, read Matthew 8:14-17, paying attention particularly to verse 17.

If our Lord Christ goes to all the trouble as the relentless and unsparing diagnostician and lays bare the diseased nerve of the sinner, He is also the One who takes the trouble. But He takes the trouble not only in the sense that He provides us help to get rid of the trouble. Many people do prefer to say only that much, to their own great loss and to the debasing of the benefits of Christ. But the Son of God and Man takes the trouble not merely by enabling us to work at ridding ourselves of the trouble. From the outset He takes the trouble which is ours and makes it His own. And having made it His own, He takes the trouble away. That is what Matthew has just finished saying, by way of his inspired editorial on the group of miracle and healing stories which precedes Matthew 9.

When Jesus healed Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, when He drove out the devils, when He dispelled the fever, when He restored sound limbs to the lame and sight to the blind, what was it, really, that He was doing? Was it merely that with a magic word He was saying what might have been easy for Him to say as God: “Be healed”? At first blush, that’s all he did seem to be doing. But Matthew knew better. He said Jesus did what He did to fulfill what the prophet Isaiah had said: “He Himself *took* our diseases and *bore* our infirmities.” He made them His own. Jesus did not merely stand off from the troubles at some godlike distance and exorcise them. *He assumed them as His own responsibility*.

Without this element of substitution, without this vicarious trouble-taker, there is not—at least not in any genuine New

Testament or Old Testament sense—a whole Gospel. Accordingly, any Scripture study which neglects this trouble-taking character of the Word of God certainly neglects the Gospel and cannot expect to make that Word authentically relevant. Our troubles are literally His, as literally as they had been ours. And they are His just because He has the authority to make them His, an authority which no other man has. Without that trouble-taking, the Word of God cannot be as relevant as God means it to be for us.

Now we are in a position to appreciate the irony in Jesus' question to the scribes, "Which is easier?" Easy, indeed! "How easy is it, really, for Me to get this man's sins forgiven? If only you knew how 'easy' it is. It is as easy as crucifixion." Our Lord was a master of irony, and here is one of the classic examples of His irony. He asks, with what is half question and half exclamation: "Yes, just which of the two *is* easier—to say 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say 'Rise and walk'? You assume it is easy for Me to say the former and hard to say the latter. You assume that if I say the man's sins are forgiven, that is *cheap talk*. All I am doing, you suppose, is saying the words, and in that case, you think, I am under no necessity to produce results. And, of course, you're only too sure that I *cannot* produce results.

Rise and Walk

"On the other hand, you think it would be hard for Me to say, 'Rise and walk,' because in that case I would have to show evidence that the words were effective, medically. Well, as a matter of fact, it is no easier for Me to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' than it is for Me to say, 'Rise and walk.' And, by the way, in order that you may know that the Son of Man, etc., I say to you, 'Rise and take up your bed and go home!'" And the paralytic did.

The point here is not that our Lord is saying, “You see, I can do one as easily as the other.” That would miss His great irony. The irony is that neither act, *neither the forgiveness nor the healing, is “easy.”* Easy, huh! “If only you realized how easy—indeed, how dreadfully hard—it is. How easy is it to get this man’s sins forgiven? It isn’t merely a matter of saying the words, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ It is a matter of taking his sins, including the effect of his sin, his paralysis, and making it Mine. To do that is the mission which has been given to Me by My Father in heaven. That’s how easy it all is.”

Let me cite a few parallel passages from the New Testament. First, one from Hebrews. As Matthew might be said to be the great Jewish-Christian gospel, Hebrews might be said to be the great Jewish-Christian epistle. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin” (Hebr. 9:22). So getting this man’s sins forgiven is not merely a matter of saying, “I forgive your sins.” There is no forgiveness without shedding of blood, without our Lord Himself bearing the sin, bearing the iniquity, bearing the palsy— yes, more than that, bearing the very blood to the point of death to get this man’s sins forgiven.

An Easier Way?

Not that Jesus could not have chosen an easier way. The verses in Matthew which I have quoted are the ones which our Lord spoke at the time when Peter tried to rescue Him in the Garden of Gethsemane by cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant: “Put your sword back in your sheath, Simon. Do you think for a moment that if I wanted to I could not marshal many legions of angels to come to My side? I could make it easy. I could do it all the easy way.” But then our Lord says in the typical language of Matthew: “But then the Scripture would not be fulfilled,” just as Mathew has said here in chapter 8 that He bore our iniquities and carried our diseases *in order that the*

Scripture might be fulfilled.

Easy indeed! But this is the way He chose because it was necessary. And perhaps we ought to look up this verse: Matthew 26:27-28. Here is the scene in the upper room on Maundy Thursday evening. Let's begin with verse 26: "And now as they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to the disciples and said, Take eat, this is My body. And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, Drink of it, all of you." And notice now the connection between the shedding of blood and the forgiveness of sins—"Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

As we read through the Maundy Thursday scene of the Lord's Supper and on through the Passion story, we see here at the end the close tie-in between His unique authority to forgive sins, on the one hand, and His Passion and death, his shedding of blood, on the other. He exercised this authority by virtue of His shedding of the blood by which He actually bears men's iniquities and carries their diseases.

Our Lord's Irony

Now, not only in this Gospel lesson but in any Scripture passage we keep God's Word relevant by emphasizing that the trouble which it diagnoses is the very same trouble that Jesus Christ takes upon Himself and thereby takes away. And to return once more to our particular text, one of the little bonuses that come with it is that we are treated to a little insight into the irony of what our Lord said to the scribes: "Which is easier?" The one is indeed as easy to say as the other. But that still leaves the question: How easy is either one?

To answer this, I ask you to consider how the cross-less

forgiveness of today keeps the Son of Man from taking the trouble, deprives man of the benefits of Christ, and keeps the Gospel from being relevant. Something really does happen, both in heaven and on earth, when our Lord says, “Your sins are forgiven.” And these words still include His “Rise and walk!” In the official religion of American piety today, one of the fondest affirmations is that there is a God, that He is personal, and that He is a God who forgives. But there is a heresy in this piety, the heresy that God forgives merely because “that’s the way he is.” “What else could He do and still be God?” And along with this goes all the sentimental pap about how “somebody up there likes me.”

What is offensive in this to the person with a truly Christian faith is certainly not the notion of a forgiving God. This could hardly be offensive to the Christian because, after all, this understanding of God started with Christianity. What is offensive here is what lies at the root of every heresy; that is, the idea that it is possible to have the benefits of God without having them through His Son, Jesus Christ, and through His cross.

Upon Earth

So you could still ask me, or I could ask the youngsters in my class, or you could ask your students: “By what authority does Jesus forgive sins?” Almost like a Greek chorus they would come back with the refrain: “By what authority does Jesus forgive sins? Why, by the authority that He is God!” Of course He is God, and if He weren’t He wouldn’t have the authority to forgive sins. But to say that and nothing more is to completely short-circuit and bypass the whole crux, if you will pardon the pun, of the Gospel. Jesus’ authority to forgive sins is the authority to forgive sins *upon earth*, not only as God but as Son of Man.

And this means that when God as Son of Man forgives sins—takes the trouble—He doesn't take the trouble merely by uttering a word but rather, as man, He takes the trouble by making other men's troubles, this other man's troubles, His very own. He did what we were required under the Law to do but what, because of Him, we need no longer do. He was made under the Law, made a curse for us, born of a woman. He became the sinner's sinner. To skirt this is to skirt the very crux of the Gospel. To skirt this is certainly to make the Scriptures irrelevant as Gospel. Worse than that, it is to deprive yourself and your students of the glorious benefits which the Word of God intends to bring them.

And now we are almost finished. What remains is perhaps not quite the punch line of this Gospel lesson, but it comes very close to being the punch line. And it is amazing how St. Matthew sums up the whole thing in one little three-letter word: "God has given such authority to *men*!" How does the Gospel lesson close? After our Lord said to the paralytic, "Rise, take up your bed and go home," Matthew added this editorial comment in verse 8: "When the crowd saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to m-e-n." We might have expected that Matthew would say that the people glorified God who had given such authority to this m-a-n. But that is not what Matthew says, and, by the way, Luke and Mark don't say it, either.

Matthew deliberately chooses the plural: "had given such authority to m-e-n." Well, who were these men? All I need do, I suppose, is recall two other examples from Matthew's Gospel, and there are others. Look at Matthew 18:18: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." These men, His disciples, are those men on earth to whom God has given such *exousia*, such authority, to forgive sins, because God

has exercised His authority as Son of Man on earth.

Disciples Authority

By extension Jesus says here to those who are His disciples, that is, to those who follow Him and follow Him all the way to the cross: “You have now, because of Me, this same authority. You have an authority which only one who is My disciple has, an authority which no un-Christed man would have. You have the authority that when you say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ the sinner’s sins are indeed forgiven. Or, negatively, when you say, ‘Your sins are bound,’ the sinner is indeed bound in his sins—and bound not only on earth but in heaven.”

As further evidence of this fact, turn to the very last paragraph of the Gospel According to Matthew: chapter 28, verses 18 and 19. This is the scene just moments before our Lord’s ascension where He is giving the Great Commission to His disciples: “And Jesus came and said to them”—now notice the word—“All *authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.” And now He turns to His disciples and says to them: “Therefore, you, you go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” These are men to whom the *exousia*, the authority to separate the sinner from his sin was given.

It Really Happens

What does this mean? It means that to keep the Word as Gospel relevant is to let the Gospel also take the trouble; that is, to take it in the name of Christ, in behalf of the Christ who shed His blood for the forgiveness of sins, and to take it away. Those who are under this Gospel—you and I and our charges—share this same authority which the Son of Man had and gives—to forgive sins, so that when they say it, or you say it, or I say

it, something really does happen.

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