

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

HEAVEN'S AUTHORITY COMES DOWN TO EARTH

Mark 2:1-12

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

When 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 people came, bringing to him a paralyzed 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!"

DIAGNOSIS: Warning: Assuming Authority that is God's is Blasphemy

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The Law Prohibits Usurping God's Authority*

The scribes (v. 6) are experts in the Law of Moses, which is fundamental to the covenant with God. They are the official guardians trained to protect the things of God. Zealous to maintain the established social and religious traditions, they seek thereby to protect God's Name (authority) from unlawful use or abuse. "Hallowed be Thy Name." Hands off! As clerical watchdogs they/we investigate unorthodox behavior and teaching. As servants of the Law they/we are quick to sniff out and question what appears to be human arrogance. "You shall not take God's Name in vain." The Law investigates and interrogates. "Why does this fellow speak this way-only God can...!" (v. 7). God's favor and grace are secured only by observing and keeping the Law, God's Word. We must resist liberals who assume "divine authority" to make pronouncements that are contrary to the explicit "Word of God," such as "who can forgive," and other issues.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unauthorized Assertions Are Judged by the Law*

"Sinner- humans" cannot and dare not forgive sins, say the scribes, because they are "sinners." When the "sons of men" say or do things that ignore the prohibitions of the Word of God and assume the prerogatives of God, our own "scribes" will accuse us/them and make judgments. But this Gospel narrative suggests that we stand under judgment because of unbelief. When the question is raised: "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy!" Jesus responds with, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?" The answer is obvious. "Those who do

not believe in him are “judged-condemned-already because they have not believed in the Name of the Son of God” (John 3:17). (We have to wonder why we no longer say “I forgive you” but “I announce to you” in the words of liturgical absolution. Is it because of misplaced piety and little faith that would rather steer away from appropriating God’s authority? After all we are “sinner-humans”.)

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Faithlessness Has Its Consequence: Condemnation and Death

Divine prohibitions condemn the use of God’s authority, i.e. “to forgive sins” (v. 7) without divine sanction. To do so invites the charge of blasphemy and the death penalty. (Death to blasphemers is not only the cry of Islam but also the Law of Moses). But what if faithlessness is the sin that invites condemnation. Coming as Jesus does under the name of “son of man” the judgment we make against him boomerangs on us when we condemn God’s initiative to bring grace and forgiveness via the “son of man” on earth as it is in heaven.” The judgment is based on “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” And “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). A traditional ending to Mark’s Gospel makes it very explicit: “He who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). Lord, I believe, help my unbelief! Unbelief cuts the life-giving oxygen tube. It leads to “deadness” over against God.

PROGNOSIS: Getting to Know Who Has the Authority on Earth to Forgive Sins

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Jesus Is God’s Promised Yes! Against the Law’s “No!.”

The solution is keyed to his name, “Son of Man”; not the apocalyptic figure of the future judgment, but the incarnate word of promise, now, today, on earth, fulfilled in our hearing. The authority of God is vested in human flesh “who for us and

our salvation came down from heaven and was made man.” It may well be that the Matthean use of Isaiah 53:14 in Matthew 8:17, “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” provides a basis for Jesus’ authority, but there is more to this “Ragman motif” (see Wangerin) than the exchange of sickness for health when Jesus says, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” This is not a traditional healing narrative; there is no word about “healing”; nor does Jesus’ pronouncement deal with some sin of which the paralytic is guilty. We are dealing with “an objective declaration of God’s absolution” that transforms the human condition, an Epiphany Transfiguration. We are led to a text that leads to the Cross. “Under the Law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22). Blood is life. “He died for our sins” to give us His life. Isn’t that why the Passover supper in Mark has Jesus saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24)? Jesus is come as “Son of Man” to take away the sins of the world. The Passion comes into view as the source of Jesus’ authority under God, but more! Jesus says to the paralytic “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” Such words suggest Easter confirms the solution! “Christ Lay in Death’s Strong Bands”, paralyzed, but “Look, Now He Stands” (LBW #134 and #152; see also Acts 2:38 and 5:31). Check out how God’s Friday and God’s “Sonday” authorize the end of the Law’s judgment and “walking the talk” under God’s grace.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Faith that Moves Mountains and Rooftops

First, “Jesus saw their faith” (v. 20), the faith of the four friends who dramatized their effort to place the paralytic at Jesus’ feet. (Did they get “faith” from previous contact with Jesus?) Here faith speaks to faith. Jesus responds to their faith with a pronouncement that calls forth the faith and

obedience of the paralytic. Jesus addresses him as “son” (teknon), a name of endearment, bestowing on him the favor of God. “He has called me by the Gospel!” This blanket absolution of the human condition sets the stage for “get up and walk!” (Note that faithful friends generate faithful obedience to a gracious command by the Son of Man. He was “healed,” for he got up, took his mat, and went home).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Amazement and Praise, Thanksgiving and Pass It on!*

“All were amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!” What seemed to be an “unauthorized saying” about forgiveness, heard by faith and unseen, was followed by a second saying that could be seen to show Jesus’ authority “both in heaven and earth.” Did Mark’s “all” include the scribes, who first interrogated Jesus about using God’s authority without authorization? It obviously included “the so many gathered around crowding even the front door” (v. 3). But more! Might we not also be amazed that God has given such authority to “sinner-humans” to declare the forgiveness of sins to one another? We too are authorized in His Name to forgive sins as if “Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.” We are free to go home. Will we, can we, “pass it on”? See Fred W. Danker, *New Age*, regarding Luke 5:17-26, a parallel narrative to Mark’s.