

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B, February 22, 2009
Is 43:18-19, 21-22, 24b-25; Ps 41:2-3, 4-5, 13-14; 2 Cor 1:18-22; Mk 2:1-12
God's Yes, No Matter What

Today's Gospel presents us with one of the longest stories of forgiveness in the New Testament. It is also the first description in Mark's gospel of the conflict between Jesus and the authorities of his day that led to his crucifixion. Ash Wednesday is this week, the beginning of our Lenten efforts to enter more deeply into Jesus's death and resurrection. Let's reflect on today's readings in that light.

The passage from Mark's Gospel actually consists of two stories. The first is a healing story. Jesus is "at home," preaching to many people packed into his house. Four men carry their paralyzed friend to him but can't get in because of the crowd. Jesus' "sermon" is dramatically interrupted as the thatched roof is torn apart and the disabled man is lowered at his feet. The friends of the paralyzed man exhibit their remarkable faith by breaking down barriers to reach Jesus. In response to this faith, Jesus miraculously restores the paralyzed man to health.

Sandwiched within two phases of the healing story is a debate between Jesus and the scribes about his power to forgive sins. When Jesus sees the faith of the paralyzed man and his friends, he says to the paralyzed man, "My child, your sins are forgiven." The Greek word for *child* here doesn't necessarily mean a young person. It is used of any intimate relation based on love, friendship, and trust.

In declaring the man's sins forgiven, Jesus really stirs up controversy. According to Jewish theology, only God can forgive sins. In today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah, God says, "It is I, I, who wipe out...your offenses; your sins I remember no more." Yet in our gospel, Jesus himself declares "Your sins are forgiven." The scribes object to this claim on theological grounds. Jesus seems to be taking to himself a prerogative that belongs only to God. And he is! That is the point. As the Son of Man and the Son of God, Jesus breaks down the barrier between God and humankind.

This is the first of the controversies that get Jesus into deep problems with the religious leaders of his time. Mark's telling of the story surely reflects the conflicts that developed between the Christian community and Judaism some 40 years after Jesus' death. It should not be understood as applying to all the scribes and Pharisees, and certainly not to Jews today. Mark's central concern is with the deeper meanings of the healing and forgiveness Jesus brings to all of us. The two great signs of God's active presence in Jesus are his healing of the sick and his forgiveness of sinners.

Jesus seems to prefer being with those who need healing. He tells his followers he has come as a physician for the sick, not for the healthy. In a passage of Mark that follows today's reading we hear that Jesus gets in deep trouble because he regularly associates and eats with sinners. Because of Jesus's

association with sinners, the leaders of the community “went out and immediately took counsel [about how] to put him to death.” The forgiveness and healing Jesus brings shocks people deeply, and ultimately it leads to his crucifixion.

The reason for this controversy is even clearer if we look at today’s second reading. Paul writes that Jesus is not "yes" and "no," but always "yes" to us. Jesus does not say: yes, I accept you if you are healthy and holy, or no, I reject you because you are weak and a sinner. I say yes to you, no matter what your condition of body or soul. Jesus as the “yes” of God means that in Jesus God affirms and loves all of us despite our weakness and sinfulness.

The unconditionality of Jesus’ love gets him in trouble. Even today we don’t think that hanging out with sinners is a good idea. Most of us think people can have a good relationship with God only if they are good as we understand goodness. But Jesus says otherwise. God accepts us, heals us, forgives us, no matter what. God loves us no matter what, just like Jesus healed and forgave the paralyzed sinner in today’s gospel.

The Lent we begin this week invites us to trust that God loves each of us no matter what. We are invited to trust in the yes of God’s love for us—me and you—right now. Let’s pray that we will grow in our trust in God’s love right now and all through Lent. That love will enable us to rise and walk in new ways.