

Every Sunday, the same group of seven people would come to church. They were friendly. They would sit in the very back. The service would start, and then, after about 10 minutes or so, before the Scripture lessons were read, they would leave. And they would do this every Sunday.

Finally, the pastor asked them why they did this. The leader of the group spoke up and told the pastor, “We’re actually members of another church. Not a Lutheran one. However, we enjoy attending the beginning of your church service, as every Sunday, we hear something that we don’t hear anywhere else. Every Sunday you say to us, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ You tell us that Jesus Christ took our sins away at the cross. We don’t hear that at our church, but we do hear it at yours. And so, we bring all of the sins that we’ve committed throughout the week to your church, we confess them to God, and then we hear those words – ‘your sins are forgiven.’ Then we go to our own church, where our family and friends attend.

The pastor encouraged them to think about staying for the entire service sometime. I’m not sure what ever happened to that group of people. But they came to hear four words, “Your sins are forgiven.”

As Lutherans, we often hear those words. You hear them at the beginning of just about every church service. You hear about the forgiveness of sins again when you take the Lord’s Supper. Do you ever get tired of hearing those words? Do they lose meaning, after a while? Just think about it – what would you rather hear: that your sins are forgiven, or that you have just won the lottery? Which one has more value, more meaning, more joy?

Today, we’re going to focus on a moment during Jesus’ ministry, when he spoke those four words. We’re going to see how those words are the most important words that you will ever hear. In fact, if someone were to ask me,

What is the difference between the Christian religion and all the other religions of the world, I would tell him, “4 words. 4 words set Jesus apart from everyone else. Your sins are forgiven. May God bless our study of these words and increase our faith in and appreciation for them.

Picture Jesus sitting in a house. A diverse group of people surrounds him. Some have come because they like him. And some have come because they don't, and they're trying to find fault. The house is packed with people. So many people are there that all the doorways and windows are blocked with people, trying to hear Jesus talk.

Four men came to that house, carrying their friend, who was paralyzed. It seems that he was paralyzed from the neck down, because he was lying on a mat. They wanted to bring him to Jesus, but they couldn't get to him – too many people were blocking the door to that house.

They found an outside stairway that led to the flat roof of the house and took their friend up there. Then they dug through the roof. Can you imagine the disruption they were causing? Jesus is trying to teach, but there's a loud noise above him. Straw is falling on everyone, including Jesus. No one's listening to Jesus because everyone is looking up. The ceiling above Jesus' head opens, and a paralyzed man is lowered into the middle of the room where Jesus is teaching.

But Jesus isn't angry about the disruption. The Bible says that he was pleased. He saw their faith – these people believed so strongly that Jesus could and would heal that paralysis that they let nothing stand in their way. Everyone was watching to see what would happen next. And then Jesus says something unexpected. He doesn't say, “You're healed,” but “Your sins are forgiven.”

Now, why did Jesus say that? The literal translation of the original Greek text reads, “Your sins have been sent away.” Perhaps something was going on in the heart of this man. Maybe he was feeling a lot of guilt – after all, in those days, everyone was taught that if you were sick or suffering, you were being punished for something you had done in your life. Maybe this man felt guilty because of that. We don’t know exactly what was going on in his heart. Still, whatever it was, Jesus wanted him to know, before anything else, that his sins – every single one of them- had been sent away forever – that he was totally forgiven and loved by God.

Before anything else, Jesus wants us to know this as well. When we come to church on a Sunday morning, it is faith that brings us here. It would be nice if the place were so packed that you had to come in through the roof. And we all come here with different earthly problems that we would like God to fix. Maybe we don’t come to church with paralysis, but we all have something. I feel pain in my chest every so often, but I’m afraid of getting it checked out, as it’s a health problem. I’m getting further into debt, and I don’t know how to get out – a financial problem. We’re fighting a lot at home – no one seems to be getting along – a family problem. Or maybe it’s something else – you’re worried about the future, your prayer hasn’t been answered yet. What is it about your life that isn’t perfect?

And maybe, we feel guilty, like that paralyzed man was probably feeling.

Guilt is the regret of the past and self-blame. Wishing you could change the things you have thought, said, and done. In our sinful world, we sometimes create our own problems. And sometimes they happen because of the broken world in which we live. Have you ever felt guilt? It’s one of the

leading causes of depression and sleeplessness. It can destroy the most assertive and confident person in the world.

And so, we come to Jesus with faith that he can help us. And when we come here, Jesus speaks to us, and before anything else, he says to us what we need to hear the most. He doesn't say, “You have just won the lottery, or “Your cancer has been cured,” or “Your marriage will instantly be perfect.” Instead, he says, “My dear child, your sins are forgiven.” Every single sin you have ever committed in your life has been “sent away.” You don't have to feel guilty anymore. Your sins have been sent away – where? To the cross. And there Jesus received your sins, put them on himself, and took the ultimate punishment that we deserved for our sins. He stood in our place, and suffered and died, so that you wouldn't have to suffer and die eternally, for your sins.

When Jesus forgave the sins of that paralyzed man, not everyone in the room was happy. Some thought he was going too far. Who does this Jesus think he is – only God can forgive sins. Then Jesus performed a miracle to prove that he could do this – he healed that man. If he was paralyzed from the neck down, he wasn't anymore. He was able to stand up. He walked right through that crowded house and out the door. There's your proof that this man's sin has been sent away.

Wouldn't it be nice if Jesus did something in your life to prove to you that your sins are forgiven? He has done something, a miracle bigger than the one in our text for today – he rose from the dead on Easter morning – the greatest miracle of them all. This was Jesus' way of proving to you that every time you hear those words – your sins are forgiven – every time – they have meaning, and they are true. How do I know they're true? The tomb is empty, Jesus is alive – there's your proof.

What about all those other problems we bring to Jesus – our worries about money, health, family, the future? What does Jesus do about those? Why doesn't he take those away, just like he took away that man's paralysis? Jesus does promise to help us, to take care of us, to work out all things for our good. One of my favourite passages of the Bible goes like this, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” In other words, if God has already fixed our biggest problem – our sin – he will undoubtedly take care of our other problems as well.

If it's God's will, he will heal you of whatever problem you have in your life. If that happens, I'm sure you'll be thankful. But you'll also be realistic because your life won't be perfect after that. That man's paralysis went away, but I'm sure he faced other issues in his life. The same is true for you. God takes your health problem away. But then a financial problem arises. God takes that away, and then a family problem arises. God takes that away, and a problem develops at work.

We'll always have something that we will want God to fix. And God will take care of us. But remember this – you already are the wealthiest person in the world, spiritually rich. You already are the healthiest person in the world – your soul is healthy. You already have the perfect family – you're a member of the family of God. Four words make all the difference in the world. They change everything for you. They bring you blessing upon blessing. Four words. Take heart, your sins are forgiven. Amen.