

“Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Health”

Bible Study by Johanna Goldbach

“The Lord's Prayer” in Luke 11:3-4a

“Healing of a Paralytic” in Mark 2:1-12

For our theme this year, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Health” there is a necessary pre-requisite. The Bible calls it **sin** or **guilt** towards God and other people. Both require forgiveness. In the reading earlier today about the “healing of a paralytic” we heard Jesus say, “Your sins are forgiven...” At the end of our meditation we prayed in the Lord's Prayer, “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” (New version: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”)

Are not such terms as “sin, guilt, trespass” obsolete, belonging to an outdated morality? When I was tormented by a personal sin, a liberal pastor explained to me that the society was responsible for it and not I myself. However, I only found inner peace when, in a pastoral counselling session, I admitted my sin and accepted forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ.

In the **Lord's Prayer**, the request for forgiveness is linked by “and” with the preceding request for daily bread. In Luke 11:3-4a, this passage reads in the New International Version: “Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.”

Bread and forgiveness are a part of our **daily** life. Some may object that daily forgiveness is perhaps somewhat exaggerated. But daily bread-winning, likewise daily work in the field of medicine, daily makes us guilty. Not only because we take many things for granted, as for example our daily food and a secure livelihood, and therefore are ungrateful to the giver; but also because in living together we become guilty towards our fellow human-beings, and indeed we do so every day.

For often imperceptibly and inadvertently we fail to show respect to colleagues, we thrust people aside and humiliate them, neglect the elderly and ill, take advantage of subordinates, ignore children, disregard foreigners. Guilt towards people creates guilt towards God; these two cannot be separated. From this insight we may pray: “Lord, forgive us our trespasses.”

Perhaps somewhat more haltingly we continue with the affirmation: “as we also forgive those who sin against us”. Do we really forgive them? Do we not rather reproach them, bear grudges against them and become bitter? Should we not instead

reach out to them, and speak a word of forbearance and forgiveness? Others soon notice whether we only pay lip-service to God's will or whether we try to live by it.

Guilt or sin therefore occurs most often in everyday relationships, in the family, in the workplace, towards friends and neighbours. In this case, it is not the weight that is important, nor the evil that we do and say, but of equal importance is the good that we know, yet leave undone and unsaid. All of this can paralyse others and ourselves, cause depression, social exclusion, spiritual rebellion, or physical illness.

What escape is there, to avoid getting oneself further entangled? No man can remove our guilt from us, nor can we ourselves wipe it out. Defence responses such as belittlement, concealment, suppression, self-justification or attempts to put something right again are admittedly helpful in the short term, but are not permanent.

In his great compassion, God offers us **forgiveness**, which, through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, has already come to pass. Jesus atoned for the sin of this world on the cross, in the place of all those who believe in him, and thereby he has reconciled us with God. However, we have to reach for it, and allow ourselves to be granted forgiveness **and reconciliation** by making a confession, in a counselling session, or in a worship service.

God awaits everyone with open arms who, like the prodigal son, resolves: "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Luke 15:18). And then in the parable they celebrated forgiveness and reconciliation, without the father making reproaches or expecting any achievements. HE bestows closeness, dignity, security.

Forgiveness and reconciliation bring peace, **healing** of the separation from God and of strained relationships among ourselves. Mutual forgiveness precedes the reconciliation of people. Whoever has witnessed this between embittered parents and children, estranged couples, mistrustful neighbours or ruthless colleagues, knows the relief and joy, the courage to begin anew. It triggers off a healing of feelings and trust, strength increases, praise and thanksgiving become possible.

By the strength of his healing love, God can also penetrate what is past. Thus, we can forgive in hindsight people who hurt us deeply but have since died. Likewise, we can be reconciled with our own selves to the extent that painful memories, feelings of inferiority, or tormenting self-reproaches lose their sting.

After these theoretical reflections, let us consider the **"healing of a paralytic"** in Mark 2:1-12. Already in the first chapter we are told that Jesus "taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law" (Mark 1:22b). News of his preaching and various healings spread swiftly, arousing the curiosity of many. A few days later he was preaching the Word of God in a house filled to overflowing and with people

standing outside.

At this point, a **paralytic** was brought along on a mat. Perhaps he had resisted at first, because he was sceptical or, like many of the scribes, thought of Jesus as a blasphemer. Then it seems that he no longer protested. In order to perhaps be healed he was prepared to face something unusual. Again, we do not know what had led to his paralysis. But we hear of the determined efforts of the four men. Boldly they removed the roof of the house to be able to lay their sick friend at Jesus' feet.

Jesus recognised their faith, their hope-filled trust that forged the link to the healing activity. Simultaneously he perceived not only the external symptoms of the paralytic, but also his inner sickness. Because Jesus knew that a person who is cleansed of his sins will also create order in himself, he went straight to the heart of his problem, saying: 'My son, your sins are forgiven.'

In being addressed as 'my son', the **paralytic** knew that he was esteemed and accepted—despite his sins. He seemed without objection to acknowledge that he was sinful and in need of forgiveness. Probably he sensed a burden fall away from him, which influenced his physical healing. With the subsequent command, 'Get up, take your mat and go home', Jesus offered him the chance to accept responsibility for his own life. Now, free from sins and with renewed dignity, the man could accept this challenge and 'in full view of them all' walk out into a new future. He had been inwardly and outwardly or, as we say today, 'holistically' healed.

That such healing activity aroused opposition among a number of the **scribes** is not surprising. For, according to Jewish law, sickness and death were a consequence of the sinful state of human beings, and healing a sign of forgiveness, over which God alone presides. Hence, when the man Jesus presumed to forgive sins, he was blaspheming—unless he himself was God.

Concerning the connection between sin and disease, I wish to let **Paul Tournier** speak. In his book 'A Doctor's Casebook in the Light of the Bible' the paragraph in Edwin Hudson's translation (Highland Books) reads as follows:

'It is quite clear from this account that Jesus is proclaiming His double power of forgiveness and healing, and that these two are bound up together. We shall return later to the subject. Through the Bible the healing of disease is presented as the symbol of God's grace which at the same time purifies the soul of its sin. Thus, while avoiding completely any suggestion of a causal link between the sins and the paralysis of the sick man, Jesus dealt at once with both.'

In accomplishing forgiveness and healing as signs of his power, Jesus was referring to his divine origin.

Another healing process seemed to have set in among **all those in attendance**,

including the critics, for 'this amazed everyone and they praised God'. Perhaps they began to realise that they were just as guilty and in need of forgiveness as the erstwhile paralytic.

In the account of the 'adulteress' Jesus said to the men who had caught her and were now demanding her punishment, 'If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' And - they all went shamefacedly away, without a single one throwing a stone (John 8:1-11).

Such a **realistic self-evaluation**, namely that we are all guilty and no-one has the right to exalt himself or herself above others, makes daily interaction with other people more sincere and tolerant. Perhaps we then might also sense in Jesus' words and actions the presence and power of God, and more often give HIM the credit for the grace we have experienced.

Forgiveness and reconciliation want to bring healing through peace with God, through ordering one's own life and through creative relationships with others. **Health** of this kind does not just mean a lack of illness, but includes a reconciled relationship to God, to oneself and to the people around us. Thus, health is a valuable gift that however is delicate, changing and not at our disposal. It is, as Paul Tournier says in the above quotation, a sign of God's grace.

Paul Tournier, 'Vom Sinn unserer Krankheit', Herderbücherei, ISBN 3-451-07746-9
Title of original edition: 'Bible et Médecine', Neuchâtel

N.B. English Translation: "A Doctor's Casebook in the Light of the Bible", published by Harper (Paperback) 1976, ISBN: 978-0-06-068389-4, or by Highland Books (Hardback) 1983 ISBN: 978-0-946616-02-2