

10.15.2023 Trinity 19 (St. Matthew 9:1-8)

Bryan Johnson has a plan. His plan is to never die, so he swallows 111 pills every day, wears a baseball cap that shoots red light into his scalp, and sleeps in a laser face-shield for collagen growth and wrinkle reduction. Johnson is a tech entrepreneur who has spent millions of dollars over the last three years developing a life-extension system he calls Blueprint. This system outsources every decision involving the care of his body to a team of doctors who use the information to develop a strict health regimen that's intended to reduce what he calls his "biological age." Johnson believes we've reached a time in history when humans can "say with a straight face that death may not be inevitable," but as you can imagine, experts disagree completely.

When doctors were asked about this plan to live forever, some of their comments were: "Death is not optional; it's written into our genes. There's absolutely no evidence that it's possible, and there's absolutely no technology right now that even suggests that we're heading that way" (Dr. Pinchas Cohen). "If I believed even a little bit that it would be possible, I would be excited. It's a pipe dream" (Dr. Eric Verdin). Bryan Johnson believes that death may not be inevitable, but medical science and the entire history of the human race tells us otherwise. Our own experience confirms what we read in Ecclesiastes: "*To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, And a time to die...*" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). We all have an appointment with death, and the words of Holy Scripture confirm this truth.

In the letter to the Hebrews (9:27 CSB), we read that "*it is appointed for people to die once, and after this, judgment.*" Death, according to the author of Hebrews, is an appointment with God. For every one of us there is a time to be born, a time to live, a time to die, and a time of judgment. A time appointed by our Creator, to stand in His holy presence, and "*give an account of ourselves*" to Him (Romans 14:12). It is through death that we are brought into the presence of our Lord in a very particular way. When our time on this earth has come to an end, no longer will we see in a mirror dimly. We will see Jesus face to face. No longer will we know in part, writes St. Paul, "*but then I shall know just as I also am known*" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

At that moment, as we stand before our Savior Christ, who is Truth itself, every heart will be open, every desire will be known, and no secret will be hid. Our hearts, our souls, and our minds, all that we are, will be laid bare before our Maker, and it's with that fact in mind, the certainty that we all have this appointment with our Lord, that I would ask you to consider these words we heard Him speak in the Gospel lesson this morning. In the passage we read, a paralyzed man lying on a bed was brought to Jesus, and the text tells us that when He saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "*Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you*" (Matthew 9:2).

Imagine for a moment how those words must have sounded to this paralyzed man, and to the people who carried him to our Lord. They'd obviously brought their friend to Jesus in faith, with the hopeful expectation that he would receive physical healing, but when Jesus looked at him lying there, paralyzed and suffering, His primary concern was not the illness or injury that had in some way terminated the connection between this man's mind and body. Instead, what concerned our Lord, was an infection of the heart that had severed the connection between his soul and God. Healing the paralysis of this man's body was of secondary importance. What he needed first and foremost is that which we all need - forgiveness of sin.

*"Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."* This remarkable statement is a powerful reminder of the way we look "*at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). Like Bryan Johnson looks at the outward appearance as he meticulously studies and tries to correct every degrading function of his body, or like the friends of the paralytic looked at the outward appearance as they carried the man to our Lord for physical healing, we also tend to look at the outward effect, and so often fail to recognize the inward cause. Yet, our Lord, the Great Physician of souls, knew exactly what the paralyzed man truly suffered from, just as He knows that which we all suffer from, and it is He alone who provides the only remedy, the only real comfort - forgiveness of sin.

Notice, it is not, "Son, be of good cheer, your health is restored." No, the statement our Lord made when He physically healed the paralytic was a simple declaration of fact. He said to the man, "*Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house*" (Matthew 9:6). A simple declaration of fact, because the

greater miracle had already been accomplished in this man. The physical healing that followed was secondary, and given, according to our Lord, so “*that you may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins*” (9:6). Physical healing was a sign that pointed to the higher work of Christ: the work that He was sent by the Father to perform (John 6:38), the reason that “*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14), the cause this man had to *be of good cheer* - Christ had forgiven his sin. The greatest good work of Christ our Savior is not found in physical healing, but in the forgiveness of sin. Divine forgiveness which removes its penalties, restores a severed relationship, and saves us from its guilt and power.

*The Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins.* It was true then. It is true now. Jesus didn't pray that the paralytic would be forgiven by God. He granted the pardon Himself: “*Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you,*” and because God alone has the Divine authority to forgive sin (Mark 2:7, Luke 5:21), this is one of several instances in which Jesus claims to be God, and the reason why the religious leaders who witnessed this event accused Him of blasphemy. He left them no middle ground then, and he leaves us no middle ground now. We either reject His claim, accuse Him of blasphemy, and dismiss Him entirely, or we, by the grace of God through faith, accept His claim, call Him Lord (John 20:28), and live our lives according to His Holy Word.

Bryan Johnson believes that death may not be inevitable, but medical science and the entire history of the human race tell us otherwise. Our own experience confirms the fact that we all have an appointment with death, and in Holy Scripture we see an example of death described as an appointment with God, a time to stand in His holy presence and “*give an account of ourselves*” to Him. It's certainly understandable, when you consider the direction of our culture, that many people would want to delay that appointment as long as possible, or deny that the day will ever come, but we know it will, and the Gospel of our Lord provides the humble, penitent Christian with reason to *be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.*

By the grace and mercy of Almighty God, you and I, like the paralytic, were carried to Jesus where we received forgiveness of our sin, and all other benefits of His passion. It's now vital that we recognize such forgiveness was

our greatest need, and that which God sent His Son to provide for the world through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Therefore, it's now our turn, as people who have been forgiven and healed and raised to new life, to be friends to the paralyzed, to reach out, lift up, to carry others to Jesus to the end that they may hear His words: son, daughter, *be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.*