

21 THE WAY OF LIBERTY

During the Middle Ages there lived a well-educated man named Muretus. At this time there were few schools and education was rare. Muretus was one of the few well-educated people in his country.

Muretus became very sick. His dignified appearance gave way to that of a traveling beggar. His beard grew and his hair was greasy and matted. As he weakened, his breath became foul from his disease.

Muretus entered a hospital where he lay weak on a bed. He was a pathetic sight. The physicians of that day were eager to learn more about the human body. When they had corpses, they would dissect them for the sake of knowledge. Consulting with one another about their various patients, the physicians came to Muretus's bed. They spoke in Latin, the language of the educated. They did not want their patient to understand what they were saying. They planned to make little effort to save Muretus. He seemed to belong to no one, and they could use his body for experiments. After all, he was "worthless."

To their surprise, the so-called worthless man replied in Latin to the physicians, "Call no man worthless for whom Christ died."

3 STATEMENTS

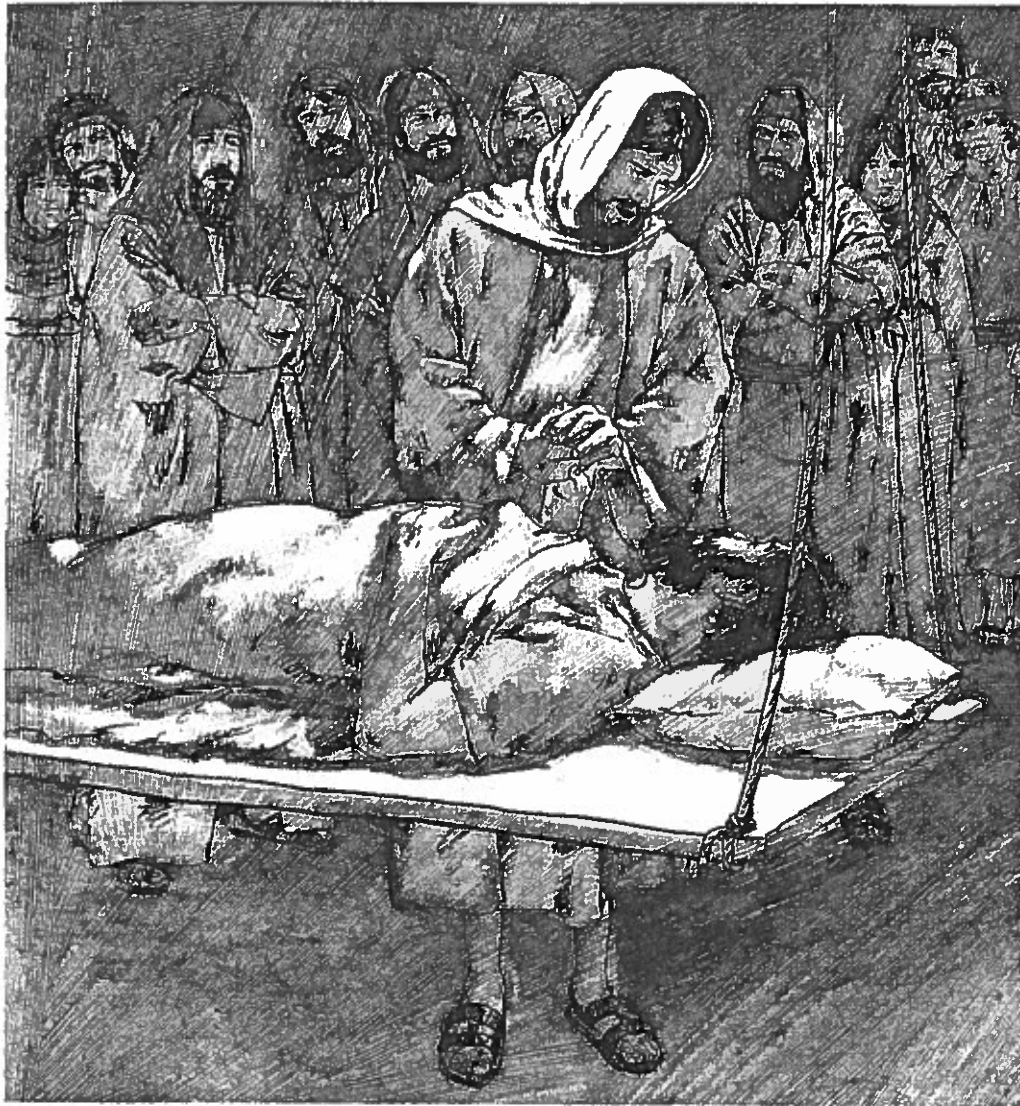
- By his word and the power of God, Jesus liberated people from bondage to sin and freed them to live.
- Jesus proclaimed God's forgiveness to sinners.
- God accepts all people with a living word of forgiveness—Jesus Christ.

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Source

LIBERATED TO LIVE

In the story of the healing of the paralyzed man in Luke 5:17-26, the word and action of the kingdom of God are shown in the person of Jesus. Neither the miracle nor the love of this man's friends is important. Focus on what happened once the man was in the presence of Jesus.



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Read the story in Luke 5:17-26 and answer the following questions.

1. What do you think the man and his friends wanted to hear?

2. What was the first thing that Jesus said to the man?

3. The Pharisees and scribes were taken by surprise by Jesus' words to the man. What surprised them?

Maybe the scribes and Pharisees were not surprised that Jesus spoke of forgiveness of sin. They probably thought that this man was paralyzed

because of something he had done and was being punished. He needed forgiveness. They related suffering to sin. But the Bible is very clear that suffering is not always to be understood in the way that says, "If you are suffering, you must have done something wrong."

The thing that did surprise them, however, was what Jesus said: "Friend, your sins are forgiven you."

4. Read their response again in verse 21. Who do they say is the only one who can forgive sin?

For you, and for the first readers of Luke, the light should go on—Jesus is the power of God to forgive and to set people free from bondage to sin.

5. When Jesus forgave the man who was paralyzed, what two things did he do?

By his word, Jesus liberated people who were in bondage to suffering. *By his word and the power of God, Jesus liberated people from bondage to sin and freed them to live.*

LIBERATED TO CELEBRATE

How do you measure the worth of a human being? Individuals and whole societies continually evaluate the worth of people. The poor are generally considered worth less than the rich. Smart students and strong athletes are generally considered worth more than those who have trouble learning and those who are not athletes.

One group of people sets itself up as the judge and the rule against which all other people are to be evaluated. This is tragic. It is sin. But what makes it even more terrible is that sometimes the people who are judged by the dominant society believe these judgments! Sometimes they live their lives as though they really are worth less than others.

Jesus proclaimed God's forgiveness to sinners. This is something we may take for granted, but for some, this was strange news.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus was continually being challenged by the religious leaders of Israel. Sometimes they were the Pharisees and scribes and other times they were a group called the Sadducees. Both groups saw themselves as strict followers of God's Law. They thought they earned God's mercy because they followed the Law so closely.

There is a story in Luke of a time when Jesus had supper with those whom the religious leaders considered worthless and beyond the reach of God. Read Luke 5:27-32 aloud.

The Pharisees thought that Jesus should never associate with sinners. But that was what Jesus did in town

after town. Those who were the most hated of all must have been astonished when Jesus spoke to them without condemnation and anger. Jesus spoke to people one-to-one. Among those most hated by the religious people were the tax collectors.

1. Look at how Luke described the "guest list." Then look at how the Pharisees described the "guest list." How do you account for Luke listing "others" and the Pharisees calling them "sinners"?

2. Who decided the worth of these people?

That Jesus was *with* these people was considered bad enough by the Pharisees, but that he would actually eat with them was even more shocking. Think how important the act of eating with someone is.

In a restaurant or school cafeteria, do you sit at a table with someone you do not know? How does it feel to eat a meal at a restaurant counter alone, surrounded by strangers?

Eating together was and is a sign of friendship, of sharing together the basics of human life. It is a special time even in our world of fast-food restaurants. The Pharisees thought Jesus was breaking all the social rules. They also may have thought that he should have been eating with them. Instead, Jesus was eating with those whom some thought were undesirable people.

Why would Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? Answer the following questions by placing an X along the continuum to indicate your response.

3. Jesus knew these people were really good inside.

Disagree

Agree

4. Jesus knew he could have more fun with these people.

Disagree

Agree

5. Jesus did not care how others lived. Right and wrong are up to the individual.

Disagree

Agree

6. Jesus spent time with these people to show them that God was ready to forgive them.

Disagree

Agree

7. Jesus meant to insult the Pharisees, so he ate with these sinners.

Disagree

Agree

Some of those who ate with Jesus that night did not understand Jesus' concern for the poor and outcast people. But for many, the concern of Jesus was very important. Perhaps these people who had been judged unworthy by others had begun to believe it. Perhaps they had lived their lives as though they were worth less than other people. But Jesus' presence with them at the table proved otherwise. He made a meal with "outcasts" into a kingdom banquet. In his meal at Levi's house, Jesus showed us a kingdom banquet of care, grace, and mercy to sinners.

LIBERATED TO LOVE

Meals play an important part in Luke's gospel. In one meal something very surprising happened. Contrary to what the Pharisees thought of Jesus in the meal at Levi's house, Jesus did not limit his table fellowship to the so-called worst people. Read Luke's account of that surprising meal in Luke 7:36-50.

We do not know how the woman knew Jesus was in Simon's house. We only know she came. The fact that she dared to break in on an all-male dinner party showed her courage and determination to find Jesus.

Perhaps that is how it is for people who have been called "worthless" by others but who have known Jesus. She must have known that she could find a friend in Jesus. Perhaps it was forgiveness received that opened her to re-



pentance, which overflowed into gratitude. She did not just kiss his feet once; Luke said "she kept on kissing his feet." God had really come into her troubled life. In the presence of Jesus, this woman who was seen as being worthless by society's best, suddenly became a sign of the kingdom.

Simon was portrayed as the opposite of the woman. Simon was an expert in the Old Testament Law. Sometimes those who studied the Law thought that God wanted them to stay away from certain types of people. Jesus told Simon not to judge others by what Simon and others thought about other people, but by the kingdom objectives that Jesus taught and lived.

Look at how Simon reversed his own verdict on the woman in response to Jesus' parable (verse 43): The one who experienced little forgiveness "loves little." Simon convicted himself out of his own mouth. But Jesus did not let Simon hang there. Even in the rebuke, Jesus gave to Simon a gracious invitation to the kingdom—receive forgiveness and then you too can love as the woman loved.

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This story is yet another example of God's desire to be gracious—a theme seen so often in the kingdom objectives in Luke 4:18-19. Here we see in Jesus the good news. *God accepts all people with a living word of forgiveness—Jesus Christ.*

Why was it that the Pharisees saw this woman as a great sinner, and Jesus just saw her as a person in need? Isn't that the way it often is? People who are like Pharisees often seem willing to point out all the sins and problems of others. But they do not stop to see the one who can set them free from their own bondage to sin. They are in bondage to sin and not at liberty to love.

The woman had been liberated to love by grace and forgiveness received. It is as unworthy people that we already have received God's word of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Is there anything left for us to do but break down the walls that separate people? We are liberated by Christ to love.

Shaping life

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

Jesus told the man who was paralyzed that his sin was forgiven. This statement caused the Pharisees to ask, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" When Jesus told the woman that her sins were forgiven, the Pharisees said, "Who is this, who even forgives sins?" In one sense, the Pharisees were right.

Who can forgive but God alone? No one, for God is the one with whom we have broken the relationship. We are at fault for sin whether it is sin against God, others, creation, or ourselves. All sin is a sign of our broken relationship with God. Only God can restore that relationship.

But then, what is your pastor doing when she or he says, "I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins"?

There are two sections in Luther's Small Catechism that provide the answers to these questions. These sections are the Office of the Keys and Con-

FURTHER

opportunities

Mishna Minutes

The story of Jesus at Simon's house bears much rereading and study. Read Luke 7:36-50 once each day this week. Read it slowly, stopping when a verse or phrase catches your attention. Close your eyes and just think about that scene. Where are you in that scene? With whom do you identify? You may wish to read this text with a parent or friend to see what they think about the woman and about Simon.

When the text has become "yours," memorize Luke 7:47-48. Know that Jesus speaks those words to you each time you hear them said by your pastor or a friend. Know, too, that you can speak them in love to others.

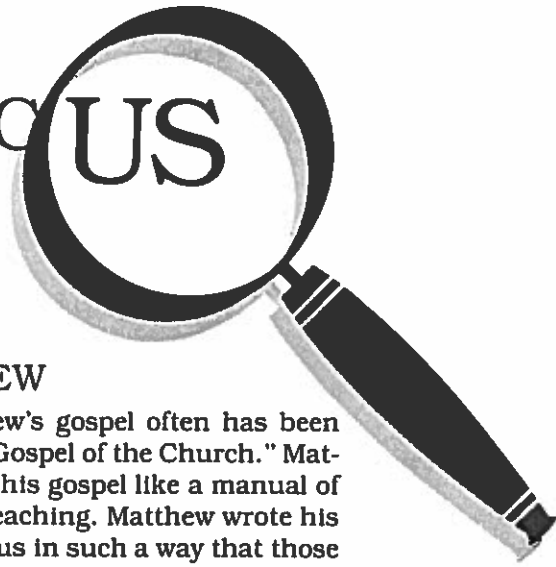
Activity 1

Take some time to think quietly about a person whom you find dif-

fession. They say that the authority to forgive has been given by Christ to the church. That means that even you are given the power and authority by Christ and in the name of Christ to forgive others as an act of love.

Often people will ask, "How do I know it's true? What if I don't *feel* forgiven?" The answer to that is simple. The power of forgiveness does not rest in your feelings, but in the Word of God. God is the main actor here. You *receive* the word and it is done. That takes a tremendous burden off you, doesn't it? It is not up to you to feel forgiven. What God says, God does. All that remains for you is to be like the woman at the dinner party—to show love. All that remains for you is to be like the man who was paralyzed. You can go and begin a new life free from bondage. Christ has set you free.

FOCUS



difficult to forgive. Christians have discovered that praying for people makes the job of forgiveness much easier. Pray for him or her. Then, go to that person and try to become friends again.

Activity 2

Ask your pastor or worship committee if you could help plan a special worship service in which confession and the announcement of forgiveness are the main focus. You may wish to use the service for Corporate Confession and Forgiveness from *Lutheran Book of Worship* (pages 193-195).

Activity 3

Make a list of the ways you judge other people. The list may include items like race, age, and style of clothing. After you have made your list, put a + sign by those that are positive ways. Put a - sign by those that are negative ways to judge.

ON MATTHEW

Matthew's gospel often has been called the "Gospel of the Church." Matthew wrote his gospel like a manual of Christian teaching. Matthew wrote his story of Jesus in such a way that those who read it would know how Jesus wanted them to live.

Matthew was written some time after A.D. 70. Tradition has said that the writer of Matthew is the apostle Matthew, the tax collector Levi. Matthew was familiar with Judaism in Israel and its interpretation of the Law. The writer also was familiar with the world outside of Israel. Many think that Matthew was written for a Christian community in the country of Syria.

The gospel of Matthew presents Jesus as the Lord of the church. Jesus is the one who fulfills and is the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah as promised throughout the Old Testament. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, in whom all of God's purposes of forgiveness and fellowship are made real for the community of faith.

