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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, September 13, 2023, Holy Cross Eve  
1 Corinthians 1:18-24, Matthew 9:1-8  
Reality is Cross-Shaped

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*[To set the stage for this reading, in our last reading, Jesus has crossed over the Sea of Galilee, calmed the storm on the Sea, and healed two demoniacs in the land of Gadarenes. Now, in this evening's reading, Jesus crosses back over the Sea to his own town, Capernaum. There, he heals again.]*

<sup>1</sup>And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. <sup>2</sup>And behold, they brought to him a paralytic, lying on his bed; and when Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." <sup>3</sup>And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." <sup>4</sup>But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? <sup>5</sup>For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? <sup>6</sup>But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Rise, take up your bed and go home." <sup>7</sup>And he rose and went home. <sup>8</sup>When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The rough reception Jesus received in the land of the Gadarenes did not discourage him from good works. Those folks sent him away. He had cast out demons from two of their fellows, permitting those demons to enter pigs and to cast themselves in the Sea. These things seemed to have astonished and dismayed the people of that land, and so they asked Jesus to depart from them. Well, Jesus might have departed from their land, but he did not depart from his ways. In our story this evening, we see that Jesus continues his battle against sin, death, and the devil. Here he heals a paralytic.

Pity the paralytic. As I get older and stiffer, my heart goes out to the one who is paralyzed. I figure that it is natural for an old man to get older and stiffer, but maybe such an old man will not drift all the way to paralysis. But this man is paralyzed. We do not know for how long he has been in this condition. Maybe he suffered an accident on the job. Maybe when he was young, he knew the joy of running and jumping and catching the ball. But now, those days are gone. Even in our modern world, it is hard for medicine

to heal a paralytic. For this man, back in ancient days, he had no hope of healing... he had no hope, that is, until Jesus came along.

In this evening's Holy Cross Epistle Reading, St. Paul warns us that there is probably some corner of our heart that thinks that the conduct of Jesus is madness. He is not using his strength in any measure to benefit himself. Jesus is not living in a reasonable way, some part of us suspects. And so we have St. Paul's opening line in this evening's Holy Cross Epistle Reading:

<sup>18</sup>For the *word of the cross is folly* to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18, RSV)

When St. Paul speaks of the "word of the cross" he means the ways of Jesus. He means the ways of Jesus that lead to the cross — ways that should become our ways too, more and more.

But there is some part of the human heart that fears that the word of the cross is folly. Think of these recent stories of Jesus. He calms a raging storm on the Sea of Galilee. Even experienced fishermen were frightened in that storm and cried out that they were perishing. But Jesus commands the wind and the waves, and they obey him, recognizing their Creator and their Master. And yet this Jesus permits himself to be cast out of the land of Gadarenes. Mere human beings, dust of the earth, ask Jesus to depart from them, and he meekly does so. He crosses back over that sea. The One who can still a storm on a sea does not need some ancient boat to cross that sea. He could simply choose to be on the other side of the Sea and it would be so. But he withholds his power. He concentrates on his path. He humbles himself, focusing his strength on helping others, remaining like the rest of us when it comes to his own welfare, vulnerable to hunger and weariness and the ordinary laws of nature.

His disciplined approach to others is shown in this evening's story of his healing of the paralytic. He begins by forgiving the sins of the man. His opponents are outraged by this and condemn him for blasphemy, and yet it is the way of Jesus. He does not begin with the miracle of healing, but with the miracle of forgiveness. He aims first of all for the soul, not the body. And yet he is capable of healing the body, and he does so. He simply gives the command, as he did in the beginning of creation. Back then, his command was "Let there be light." Now his command is "Let there be health," and, as our Bible text puts it, the paralytic "rose and went home."

But, again, St. Paul warns us that it is the natural way of the world to declare that this whole thing is nonsense. If Jesus has such power that he can still storms on the sea, cast our demons, and raise up a paralytic, why in the world does he not use some of that power to benefit himself? It is a natural way for us humans to think: If we have strength in this world, we should use

the first part of that power to benefit ourselves. It is just that Jesus never seems to do that. When he uses his strength — whether his human strength or his godly strength — he always uses it to save others. His example bids us to discipline the use of our strength too in such a way that we benefit others. We could certainly make a good case for using some of our strength to make sure that we have good retirement funds, for example, so that we do not make ourselves a burden on others. In that way, we are still keeping our eye on others. But in any case, the way of the cross puts a presumption in favor of using our strength to help others. It slants our thinking and our concern away from ourselves toward others.

Reality, then, is cross-shaped. That is the great fundamental conviction of our Christian faith. It is the conviction we salute on this Holy Cross Eve. It is a straight-on confrontation with the world's usual conviction of egoism. The world might believe, in its heart of hearts, that what is right for us is whatever we can get away with. Our innate human instinct might be that the final good is some good state of ourselves. But Holy Cross Day comes along and says that this innate human instinct is simply wrong. It is out-of-synch with the ways of God and therefore out-of-synch with the ways of reality. Our continual inclination to serve ourselves is futile. It amounts to wasted effort. The true way of life might look foolish in the eyes of the world, but St. Paul says that it is not foolish but rather power — the “power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Again, reality is cross-shaped. We fit in best with the way things really are when we turn our strength toward saving others, when we take up our cross and follow Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.