

I met Matthew when I was dating his sister back in graduate school at Purdue. Matthew was an interesting character.

When he was in elementary school, he kept getting beat up. When the good sisters who taught there called in his mother to say that there was something wrong with him – that is, he wouldn't fight back – his mom asked the sisters what Matthew had to say for himself.

Well, the sisters never thought to ask, so right there in front of his mother, they asked. After thinking a second or two, Matthew said, "I'm trying to be more Christ-like."

For the rest of his time at that school with those sisters, Matthew sort of walked on water.

The summer when Matthew was 13, he was at a public swimming pool. Pretty much like any public pool – deep end; shallow end; diving board; slide. I don't know if they have slides at public pools any more, but in the '70s every pool had one. Green fiberglass ... you'd stand in line for your turn and whoosh, splash! You'd end up in the water.

And when the adults weren't watching, sometimes, you'd go down face first.

I'm pretty sure you weren't supposed to. But it was quite a thrill.

And on that day in the mid 1970s, Matthew went down the slide face first.

Shortly after he entered the water, he smacked his head on the bottom. But something different happened this time. Something bad. Matthew couldn't move. And he couldn't breathe. The last thing he says he thought before he passed out was – "I'm dead. But if I live, it'll be God's will."

Pretty heady stuff for a 13-year-old.

And Matthew did live. For a few years hooked up to respirators. Multiple surgeries and hospital visits.

You see, after that pool accident, Matthew was paralyzed from the neck down.

When I met Matthew 13 years later, he was in the kitchen of his parents house. It seemed he was chasing the dogs with his electric wheelchair. He got around really well in that contraption. If he like you, he'd roll over your toes to watch you jump.

By then, Matthew had gone to college and already had a degree in History. He had written all of the papers for his classes by sucking and blowing Morse code into a computer, and having it show up on a TV screen. He taught school for a while; but because of his paralysis, he was prone to long bouts of pneumonia – and eventually he couldn't teach anymore. Eight years later, it would be pneumonia that killed him.

Today we hear about the miracle of the paralytic in the Gospel. We don't know how he got that way – whether it was an accident, or an illness, or if he was born that way.

But there's too big of a crowd to get into the front door, so his friends bring him up on top of the house, and dismantle the roof, and lower him down to Jesus.

Sort of makes typing four years of term papers in Morse code through a straw sound easy, doesn't it?

We know how it ends, the man is miraculously healed and takes the stretcher he came in on, and walks away.

But the greater miracle is the one that happened first; when Jesus says, "your sins are forgiven."

What does this mean for us?

I would hazard a guess that we all know someone who is suffering from a sort of spiritual paralysis. That someone may be us. But a spiritual paralysis that has a cause – and I would propose that the cause of this spiritual paralysis is a failure to forgive – what I would call "un-forgiveness."

We all know the Lord's prayer, the Our Father. And in that prayer we say "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." And so what happens if we don't forgive? We lose out on the forgiveness that God so freely showers on us in Christ.

It may be someone who said something to us years ago. And we thought to ourselves, "I'll never forgive that." But in that simple action, you've killed the greatest spiritual gift you can receive or give – forgiveness. In that simple act, you've paralyzed yourself spiritually.

By withholding forgiveness, we don't punish the other person. Rather, we punish ourselves. We prevent ourselves from receiving the graces of love and forgiveness that we should be soaking in every minute of every day.

Un-forgiveness hurts only ourselves.

In three days we will enter the season of Lent. And in preparation for this time of deepening prayer, of deepening our relationship with God in Christ; let us reflect on where we may have failed to forgive.

And as we echo those words of Jesus, "you are forgiven" to whoever it was, or whatever situation, let us joyfully embrace the new outpouring of graces we will have unleashed in ourselves, and the deep spiritual healing – the healing of our own spiritual paralysis – that comes with forgiving.

And later on in this liturgy, when we all recite the words of the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father – let us know that when we say "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;" that what we are saying is not only nice words, but is truth – in Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.