

Sermon 18.11.18

Matthew 9:1-8

And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” Then some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” —he then said to the paralytic— ‘stand up, take your bed and go to your home.” And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.

SERMON:

(Start with breath, noticing how the breath feels, actually feels, and perhaps notice your thoughts. Just for a moment...

Pray together: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, Oh Lord, my rock and my redeemer.)

I’d like to start with an experiment. This feels a little risky in a room with many scientists, but let’s have some fun with it and see what we learn about ourselves.

I’m thinking of a rule, and I want you to try and figure out the rule. I’ll begin by giving you three numbers, and the way you can get information is by saying three numbers and I will say “Yes, that follows my rule” or “No, it doesn’t follow my rule.”

And then you can propose what you think the rule is.

So here are my numbers: 2-4-8

So, give me any numbers and I'll let you know yes, or no, if they follow the rule.

So what do you think the rule is?

So propose 3 other numbers and you can then propose what you think the rule is.

The point of the three numbers is to try and figure out what the rule is.

(finish experiment. For those reading this, follow link in footnote 1 to see full experiment.)

So what just happened here? The way most of us think, and see the world, is to try and confirm what we believe. In a case like this experiment, we give numbers, an answer, where we expect a "yes". Again and again we collect evidence that confirms what we think - even when our hypothesis, or ideas are not correct. Psychologically this is known as confirmation bias.

Confirmation bias is a selective collection of evidence.

So how does confirmation bias work? We all have preconceived ideas about how something behaves, and to confirm these ideas, what we tend to do is gather evidence and recall information from memory selectively and interpret them in a biased way. These biases are especially strong and noticeable when we have emotionally significant issues and established beliefs. And the stronger the belief, or more charged the emotion, wow - our radar is on high alert to notice ONLY the things that confirm our entrenched idea - everything else gets ignored. The phenomenon is also called myside bias.¹

¹ <https://explorable.com/confirmation-bias>

In this experiment, chances are you weren't too invested in what you thought the rule was for my numbers - not so hard to accept a new idea and think differently. But let's take a look at how confirmation bias might be involved in today's gospel reading.

It begins: And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

He came to his own town. Jesus is coming home - back to the place where he grew up, where he's known - that's Jesus', son of Joseph, you know, the carpenter. And what's he doing, going around, teaching, healing, stirring things up?

Some are willing to stretch their belief and listen with new ears, with a new understanding. Some have so much faith in this man's extraordinary power that they carry their friend, on his bed, to be healed.

When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic "take heart, your sins are forgiven". It goes on: Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'?"

Why do you think evil in your hearts? And 'which is easier to say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, stand up and walk?

We get two questions this morning!

Why do you think evil in your hearts?

I wonder, what's going on here with the scribes?

Let's come back to this idea of confirmation bias. You see, as much as we'd like to see ourselves as rational beings, in reality, in our full humanity, we don't simply

perceive the world as it is, we interpret the world by doing “cognitive shortcuts”. Much of the time that works just fine, but these shortcuts create blind spots - cognitive bias. Confirmation bias leads us to seek out the facts that support our opinion and ignore or discount facts that don’t. This is why even fair-minded people can read the same Bible, and come away with entirely different perspectives...because they aren’t really reading the same Bible. People - all of us - cherry pick, and the divisions that split us up stem from the different parts of the orchard we pick from. ²

Did you know it feels about twice as bad to lose something as it does to get it in the first place? This “loss aversion” helps to explain why even good changes freak us out. Why are we so afraid of losing? Our aversion to loss is a really strong emotion. It’s an expression of fear. And it’s why we tend to focus much more on negative emotions than positive ones. Negative thoughts and emotions are like velcro - they stick, and positive ones like teflon - easily sliding off. Studies find that we are more upset about losing \$10 than we are happy finding \$10. Roughly speaking, losses hurt about twice as much as gains makes us feel good. Ownership is not limited to material things, it also applies to ideas. Once we take ownership of an ideology we tend to value it more than it is worth. And we hate to lose an argument. Sound familiar?³

So back to our story - the scribes. They’re invested. Heavily invested in the religious system and how closely tied it is to the political system of the day. They have some very entrenched ideas about who has power and authority, and who can do what. In their understanding, God is the only one who forgives sins - so Jesus’ words are

² Willimon, William, relating information from *The Irrational Jesus*, by Ken Evers-Hood.

<https://willwillimon.wordpress.com/page/1/>

³ Psychology Today: What is Loss Aversion?

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/science-choice/201803/what-is-loss-aversion>

blasphemy to them. For Jesus to be stepping outside of tradition and claiming such power and authority would have been very threatening, causing fear for those in leadership in the Jewish community.

They can only see from the side of fear and aversion. Who does he think he is? We know where he comes from, we know who he is. They have a lot to lose in giving up their beliefs, no matter how small and paralyzing they may be.

The paralytic, the friends carrying him - They probably don't have much to lose. They are poor, marginalized, looking for help wherever they can find it. They don't fear the radical newness of Jesus, they act out of love.

Fear or love? Those are two major ways of thinking and acting. In Mark's gospel, this story gives us more detail, with the space where Jesus is teaching being so crowded that the only way to get to him is by lowering the paralytic down through a hole in the roof! These friends go above and beyond - they work from a place of love while the Scribes come from a place of fear. How differently they each see and respond to the person, Jesus!

What happens when we live out of place of fear? What happens in our brain? Thoughts become less rational. We tighten up physically and emotionally. Little space for anything new. Loss aversion sets in.

Jesus doesn't work out of a place of fear, he simply names the evil he perceives in the hearts of the scribes. He offers two alternatives - what's easier to say: your sins are forgiven -receive emotional and spiritual healing and wholeness, or stand up and receive physical healing and wholeness?

Jesus offers this Radical notion: *you are free, free of all that paralyzes you*. So often we have boundaries put on us by religion, by our own thoughts, by others. In his first

letter to the Corinthians, Paul says: “Everything is permissible, not everything is beneficial” (1 Cor. 10:23). Paul was encouraging that community to consider how their actions were impacting others, specifically around the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. You can do it, it’s not a sin, he says, but if it negatively impacts your neighbor, than you might want to think twice.

Just as he beckoned the paralyzed man to stand up and take his mat, so Jesus invites us to be healed, spiritually and emotionally, to be free - and then to stand up, walk and take this liberation out into the world to live his message of love.

Jesus offers freedom. He frees this man from spiritual and physical bondage. An inner and an outer miracle. Does he Offer that to us? Freedom is scary. “I have come to give you life, and give it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus is offering to this paralyzed man to be free - physically, spiritually, emotionally free - from sin and from whatever it is that binds his body.

Freedom can be a scary thing, because with this amazing freedom that Jesus offers come great responsibility. The freedom that Jesus offers needs to be lived within the container of love. And so alongside this expansive freedom, we need to ask ourselves “is this beneficial?”

I am free - free to take my paycheck and go blow it at Hollywood Casino, but is it beneficial?

Have you ever been in an argument and knew exactly what not to say? You knew what would most wound the person, what would unnecessarily drag up the past, what would get right at the person’s heart in the quickest, most hurtful way? Any yet you said that thing anyway? Me too. That’s the freedom we have. And what we said might be factually right, confirmation bias or not, but was it beneficial?

I am free to do to do and say all kinds of things, but is it beneficial? Do my choices lead to life, life rooted in God?

When we live out of freedom, the freedom found through faith, freedom that can terrify us and propel us to new ways of living, we may experience that same gift of liberation from our sins and from those things that paralyze us.

Freedom is the ultimate ideal of God. God cares about justice and freedom in all aspects of our life. This was story of the Jewish people - Moses' story. Jesus came to liberate his people and us.⁴

The paralyzed one is not named in this story. Might he represent us, the symbolic paralysis of the human condition - a lack of true freedom? Though not dead, the paralytic on his mat is the symbolic antithesis of the aliveness and freedom befitting the children of God. When Jesus asks "why do you think evil in your hearts?", he answers by performing the invisible miracle of forgiving his sins, then performs the visible miracle of healing that is simply it's outer sign.⁵

I wonder, What paralyzes you? Where is healing needed in our lives? How might Jesus be inviting us to the aliveness and freedom as children of God?

⁴ Liturgist podcast. *Christian Part 2*. Season 4, episode 17. 9/27/18

⁵ McManus, Kathleen.2013. *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew*, Vol. 1.