

SERMON SERIES/TITLE: "Gospel of Freedom: Freedom from Paralysis"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 9:2-8
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 2, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

This week, the church received a piece of mail from The Morton Cure Paralysis Fund. They were advertising their 22nd annual golf tournament. If you're going to be in Minnesota in September, you might want to participate. ☺ We received the invitation because our church has included The Morton Cure Paralysis Fund as one of our month-long Mission Emphases. The Morton Cure Paralysis Fund is close to our hearts because it's close to the hearts of the Faz family. Peter Morton, for whom the Fund was named, is Jenny Faz's brother. Peter was paralyzed in a bicycle accident in 1997. That was the same year that Christopher Reeves suffered his paralyzing spinal cord injury. In 1997, "the accepted prognosis was that nothing could be done." But, thanks to funding for research, "laboratories around the world are discovering potential treatments, and human clinical trials are underway." In the past 30 years, progress has been made that gives hope that, one day, those who suffer spinal cord injuries will be able to gain freedom from paralysis.

During this month of July, in which we celebrate our nation's declaration of independence, I'm going to preach a series of sermons called "The Gospel of Freedom." All five of these sermons will come from the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 9 and 10. As we delve deeply into these stories about Jesus in the weeks ahead, we'll explore freedom for mercy, freedom for life, freedom from limitations, and freedom for service. Beginning today with Matthew 9:2-8, I invite you to consider some ways we can gain "freedom from paralysis."

1—PHYSICAL FREEDOM FROM PARALYSIS

Let's begin with physical freedom. That was, after all, why some people came to Jesus carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They brought this man to Jesus because they wanted Jesus to heal him of his

physical infirmity. And, after his encounter with Jesus, this man was able to stand up, take his bed, and go to his home. His helpers could declare that their mission had been successfully accomplished. The man who had been lying on the bed had received freedom from physical paralysis.

Today, we continue to rejoice in God's divine hand in miracles of healing. Of course, there are still people who suffer and die, despite untold prayers and the best in medical care. We all know about some of those difficult situations and wonder why. But, in general, our experience is quite positive. Those of us who have insurance have access to replacement parts for our knees, hips, eye lenses, and heart valves. We can receive medications that lower blood pressure and fight infections, we can be guided in therapies that ease our pains, and we can be treated with radiation and chemicals that kill off our cancer. Because of these miracles carried out by God through good and smart people, we're living longer, healthier, and more active lives. We aren't stuck lying on a bed. Praise be to Jesus the healer! We have physical freedom from paralysis.

2—FREEDOM FROM SPIRITUAL PARALYSIS

There's more to this little gospel story than "just" physical healing, however. In this Matthew 9 story, we also see an opportunity to gain freedom from spiritual paralysis. You may have noticed that, even though the man was brought to Jesus because he was physically paralyzed, that wasn't the first thing Jesus addressed. The first words from Jesus were, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

The scribes called Jesus a blasphemer because Jesus presumed to appropriate and apply God's divine power of forgiveness. But, to Jesus, such an action on behalf of God made perfect sense. Jesus knew that his purpose, and the purpose of his disciples, was to serve as agents of God in the world. The physical curing of paralysis required God-level intervention, and what better way to demonstrate and prove God's presence than by offering forgiveness? What better way to signal God's loving involvement in this man's life than by providing him freedom from spiritual paralysis?

Now, as soon as we link physical illness with sin and forgiveness, I realize we break open a hornets' nest. If Jesus had just proclaimed the man physically healed, the scribes might not have complained. But when Jesus connected the dots between spiritual and physical illness and healing, oh boy.

Today, our minds most quickly go to the blaming and guilt that occur in regard to choices and behaviors that possibly cause or maybe contribute to certain kinds of ailments. We all know that overeating can affect obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and strain on one's joints. We all know that smoking can cause lung cancer and emphysema. We all know that unprotected sex can conceive unwanted pregnancies and pass along sexually-transmitted diseases. We all know that driving under the influence, texting while driving, or not wearing your seat belt can raise the rates of accidental injury and death. Because we know these things, we do often blame ourselves and others when these kinds of failings bring on or exacerbate physical illness and medical issues.

But rarely does any healing or any freedom occur when blame is our first and primary response. Before any doctor, counselor, pastor, teacher, parent, spouse, or friend can persuade anyone to improve their attitudes and behaviors, there usually has to be some kind of empathy. There has to be some kind of understanding and compassion. There has to be some kind of relationship and connection based on forgiveness. Spiritual barriers have to be broken down. The power of God's loving presence needs to be made evident, and the forgiving support of friends, family, and a community of faith also needs to be seen and felt.

In case you didn't notice this, I want to point out a detail of this story. As divinely forgiving as Jesus was, he didn't just forgive on his own. Verse 2 tells us that "when Jesus saw *their* faith"—that is, the faith of those who carried the paralytic to Jesus—that's when Jesus said, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." It was as if Jesus were merely pointing out the obvious truth that already existed and that anyone could see. This man, whose friends loved him so much that they would carry him on his bed to Jesus, had nothing to be ashamed of or to feel guilty about. Whatever he might have done wrong, his

friends had obviously forgiven him for it. Their loving concern for him was so much greater than whatever grudges they might have harbored. And, since this man was spiritually free with his friends, then he certainly had no reason to be paralyzed with God.

The scribes might not have liked it, but Jesus' words of liberation were essentially, then, the divine rubber stamp to the spiritual freedom already granted by the man's companions. The scribal leaders of the established faith may have been withholding their approval, but, seeing the compassionate faith of the man's friends, Jesus was willing and able to bless and grant the spiritual freedom that allowed this man to stand up and walk.

3—APPLICATION TODAY

So, what does all that mean for us today? Well, for sure, we can say that Jesus wants us and others to have freedom from paralysis of both the physical and spiritual kind. And I think it's fair to say that both kinds of freedom from paralysis are more likely to occur when we practice forgiveness.

That's not to say that our forgiving hearts combined with Jesus' forgiving heart will automatically result in physical healing. Sadly, we know that isn't always true. A difficult case that's been weighing on me recently is the situation of Oliver Tibbitts. Oliver, who is only 10 or maybe 11 years old, has spent three-quarters of the last year at Primary Children's Hospital. I know about Oliver because his father, Bill Tibbitts, is the leader of CORC, the Coalition of Religious Communities, here in Utah. Through Bill's interfaith advocacy on behalf of the poor, Bill is connected to people of nearly every religion. Mormons and Methodists, Presbyterians and Catholics, Episcopalians and Unitarians, Jews and Buddhists, Congregationalists and Disciples of Christ, and more have been praying that little Oliver Tibbitts would gain freedom from leukemia. His medical staff has done everything they can imagine, and yet, Oliver is drawing closer and closer to death.

And so, what kind of forgiveness are we able to offer in Oliver's case? Can we forgive that little boy for contracting a disease that costs not only his family and his insurance company but also our whole

society a lot of money? Can we forgive his parents who haven't been able to work as much because they've had to spend enormous amounts of time at the hospital? And when we think about Oliver residing for nine months at Primary Children's Hospital, can we imagine him as a symbol for all the other children who are able to receive care there only because of the provisions of the Medicaid safety net? In the U.S. healthcare news this past week, I learned that Medicaid pays for 49% of all births, 39% of all children's healthcare, 76% of all poor children's healthcare, and 60% of all disabled children's healthcare.²

Our society is currently having a heated debate about whom we are willing to forgive and carry toward healing freedom. Will we commit to no-blame, merciful freedom for children? How about for the 30% of all disabled adults who depend on the Medicaid safety net? Will we forgive the 64% of nursing home residents who have used up all their life savings and now must rely on Medicaid assistance?² Will we relegate our parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles to less-than-adequate home care, or will we grant them forgiveness and ask Jesus to do likewise, so that they can receive freedom from paralysis?

CONCLUSION

In this gospel story of freedom, the scribes got upset at Jesus because they thought he was usurping power. And, in fact, Jesus was messing with the status quo. Instead of bowing to the top 1% or 10% of the population, Jesus was giving the lowly of society the right to decide who should receive God's help. When Jesus endorsed the forgiveness of the friends, he didn't just heal one man. Jesus signaled to all of us that this is the ministry of Christ: When we stop condemning the sick and actually try to help them, that's when healing will come for all of us. That's when we'll all find freedom from paralysis.

¹Golf Tournament Brochure, MCPF, 5021 Vernon Ave., Ste. 145, Minneapolis, MN 55436.

²All these Medicaid statistics come from Jim Wallis, June 28, 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/how-people-faith-can-make-difference-health-care-debates>