

“Nothin’ Left to Lose”

Matthew 9:1-8

Dr. Randy Working  
Christ Presbyterian Church  
June 21, 2009

Max Lucado quotes a sailor who wrote about his experience on a naval training exercise. A battleship assigned to the squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. The sailor wrote,

I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.”

“Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain called out.

The lookout replied, “Steady, Captain,” which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, “Signal that ship: ‘We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.’”

Back came the signal, “Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees.”

The captain said, “Send: ‘I’m a captain, change course twenty degrees.’”

“I’m a seaman second-class,” came the reply. “You had better change course twenty degrees.”

By that time, the captain was furious. He spat out, “Send: ‘I’m a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.’”

Back came the flashing light, “I’m a lighthouse.”

We changed course.<sup>1</sup>

Matthew has been emphasizing Jesus’ authority over sickness and over nature. Now, he shows Jesus’ authority to forgive sins. Look at the characters of this story:

Jesus

His followers

---

<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm* (Waco: Word Publishing, 1991), 153.

Those he helps

His enemies.

Jesus' words here are directed to people who oppose him, but the purpose of telling the story is to show people his authority. It can help us understand the story if we look at Mark's version (Mark 2:1-12), because he records some things Matthew left out.

### The Setting: Jesus Preaching In A Crowded House

A few years ago in Seattle, I heard that the famous Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, who was designing the new Seattle Public Library, was going to be giving a lecture at the University of Washington one evening. I thought, "Great, I'd like to hear that," so I drove down to the University and parked under Red Square. I thought this was going to be popular, so I'd better go early to get a seat. An hour before the lecture was to start, I got to Kane Hall and discovered a line of a thousand people wrapped all the way around the building, and that was the overflow. The hall was already packed, standing room only, and there was no possible way to get in.

It was like that in our story for today. Matthew says Jesus took the boat across the lake and stepped out at Capernaum, the town Jesus used as his ministry headquarters. He and his followers went to the house where they stayed in town, and it was very crowded.

Luke's version of the story (Luke 5:17-26) tells us the people came from all over Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. They had come to check for themselves what was going on in Galilee. How did these people hear about Jesus? Right before this event, Jesus had been doing miracles of healing. One of these was the cleansing of the leper, when Jesus told the healed leper to go to Jerusalem and show himself clean to the priest. That was a public announcement by Jesus that he had the power to cleanse, and that he fulfilled the Law. It was a kind of personal invitation, so they came to check him out.

So, the people packed into the house where he was preaching, so much that there was no room left. Four men brought the paralytic, but when they couldn't get in, they climbed up on the roof, made an opening, and lowered the man to Jesus.

How could they do that? Houses in Galilee usually had roofs made of logs and branches packed with earth. Repairing a roof was a regular job since storms would wear away parts of the roof and eventually make leaks. If that's what the roof was, it's easy to see how the men could start pulling up branches to make an opening. The crowd must have been startled to feel debris falling down on them, but the men were determined to get the man to Jesus.

When Jesus saw their faith he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Now, there were also some scribes there, apparently checking on Jesus' teaching. They were the scholars and teachers of Israel, the custodians of the Bible tradition. They were also Jesus' major opponents. When they heard Jesus, they thought his words were blasphemy. That means saying something wrong or irreverent about God. Jesus knew what they were thinking, and he responded not just with words, but also with

action. He's always like that: his words and work always go together, and his work backs up his words. Mark says the people were amazed, and Matthew explains that God had given this authority.

Look at the pattern of the story:

The paralytic is brought to Jesus; Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven."

Teachers are upset by this, and accuse Jesus of blasphemy.

Jesus tells them, "The Son of Man has authority."

Jesus heals the man, and says, "Take up your mat."

The passage is constructed like a story within a story. The main event is Jesus talking to the paralyzed man and healing him. But in the middle of that event, there is the response to the challenge of his enemies so he can explain the point of the miracle. The point is, Jesus has the authority to forgive sins. And for the paralyzed man, and for us, too, our primary need is the forgiveness of sins, not healing.

This raises the question: What is the connection between sickness and sin?

The Bible teaches that all sickness, pain, and death happen because of sin in the world. But that doesn't mean someone who suffers has sinned worse than those who don't. In fact, in a sinful world like ours, the righteous often suffer more because they do right: chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews makes that clear. We all have pain in our life, and we all die eventually. And Jesus came into the world to solve this problem by taking our sin and sickness on himself. It's like the old song, "There is a balm in Galilee, that saves the sin-sick soul, and that makes the wounded whole."

Jesus told the man, "Take heart, son." Take heart? It wouldn't seem like the paralyzed man had much to be cheerful about. But then Jesus added, "Your sins are forgiven." Really? If that was true, there was great reason to take heart. If we are forgiven, we are blameless, justified, and can stand before God with a clear conscience, at peace with him and with ourselves.

Many people would have considered the paralytic a sinner and an outcast—after all, why else would he be in this condition? John 9 tells how people saw a blind man, and asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

People might have wondered the same about this paralytic. They might have assumed his condition to be the judgment of God, but now he was restored. Their criticism was beside the point. Most important of all, Jesus did what everyone knew only God can do. You and I can forgive someone else for the harm they've done to us, but not for someone's sins in general. Only God can absolve us of all sin, of our corrupt human condition, and that's what Jesus did here.

Jesus healed this man to show that He, the Son of Man, has the authority to forgive sins. If He could heal the disease, He could also heal the cause of the disease, the sin. If He

had simply forgiven the sin, people would not have known if the man was forgiven or not. Now they knew.

Years ago, Chris Kristofferson wrote the song “Bobby McGee,” and Janis Joplin sang a powerful version of it. It has the line, “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” I think that describes the story this morning.

The paralytic had nothing left to lose. And so did his friends. They could go all out, bank everything on the goodness and authority of Jesus.

So, as I wrap up I want to share a couple conclusions.

First, you’ve got nothing to lose by putting all your hopes in Jesus.

Remember the call to confession we used this morning? It was from 1 John 1:8-9, and it has the wonderful lines, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth has no place in us. But if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” What a wonderful promise! He cleanses us from everything unclean, and he forgives all our sins.

In my last church, a woman came up after the service for prayer. She was a believer, but she felt she had done some things so bad that she didn’t dare to bring them to the Lord. I asked her if she would like to pray about that now, and she said yes. So, we prayed, and pronounced the Lord’s forgiveness, and the sense of grace and light in the room was palpable, and it was as if the burden fell away, and her face lifted.

We can know that grace, too. What have we got to lose by coming to Jesus?

Second, you’ve got nothing to lose by bringing others to Jesus, too.

The “Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite title for himself. It comes from the book of Daniel, and it’s the name of the Messiah, God’s way of bringing life and salvation. It’s tied to the titles from Isaiah like Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And because only God can forgive sins, and Jesus claimed that right, was the same as his claiming to be God. His enemies knew this full well. He has all authority, so we don’t have to worry about what anyone else thinks. We don’t have to put up any barriers. If we can just be stretcher-bearers for others, to show them Jesus by word or action, they can experience his wholeness, too. In fact, sometimes the greatest thing we can do is to pray, to bring others to Jesus in prayer. He can help like nobody else. Why do we hesitate to bring them to Jesus? What have we got to lose?

That’s how you get the kind of healing that only comes from God, whether now or when we get to heaven. It’s by faith. It’s by trusting in Jesus and his power to make us whole. And the four friends knew if they could get the paralytic to Jesus, everything would be all right.

So, put all your hopes in Jesus. And be about the work of bringing others, too. What have you got to lose?