Seeing is Believing
Matthew 9.1-8
June 9, 2013

Introduction:

Many years ago back when Karen and I were living in Elk Grove Village, one of the many suburbs of Chicago, a door-to-door salesman rang our doorbell one morning. Now I’m not one who cares much for anything being peddled by salesmen randomly knocking on our door, so had I been the person answering the door I would have politely but firmly told the salesman that we were not interested. But I wasn’t home at the time; instead Karen was, and she has a much softer heart than I do. The gentleman was a salesman from Kirby, a company which produces vacuum cleaners. He was going around house to house in our neighborhood offering to clean the carpet in one of our rooms in order to demonstrate what Kirby vacuums could do. Karen, being a sucker for anything free, especially a free deep cleaning of our carpet, made the appointment.

A week or so later the representative from Kirby returned, cleaned our living room carpet as promised, and then proceeded with a lengthy sales pitch about the virtues of Kirby vacuum cleaners. When I came home from work that evening I found myself impressed with the very thorough cleaning job that was done on our carpet, but found myself considerably less impressed with my wife who sheepishly confessed she now wanted to buy one of these Kirby vacuum cleaners, which came with a price tag of about a thousand dollars.

Now to make a short story even shorter: I gave in to Karen and we dropped a thousand bucks on a vacuum cleaner. I had to admit it: the Kirby did a fantastic job of cleaning our carpet. The demonstration of what the Kirby could do really sold it for us. Seeing was believing. That salesman could have spouted off all kinds of claims about Kirby vacuum cleaners, but nothing he could have said would have been enough to convince me to drop a grand on a glorified vacuum. Demonstrating what it could do sealed the deal. And I’m happy to report, Karen was right. It was money well spent: we still have our Kirby well over ten years later and have never had any problems with it. I don’t regret our purchase one bit.

My goal in telling you all this isn’t to convince you to buy a Kirby vacuum cleaner but rather to illustrate the idea that seeing is believing. Anyone can make a claim; words are cheap. But demonstrating the validity of that claim with something we can see has an undeniable power to convince. Jesus understood this and so in the passage we’re going to be looking at this morning, we find Jesus backing up his words with action. Jesus claims to be able to forgive sins: well, anyone can say that because there’s no way to prove whether it’s true or not. So Jesus does something everyone can see to demonstrate that the authority behind his words isn’t just smoke and mirrors.

So let’s give our attention to what Jesus does by opening your Bibles with me to the first few verses of Matthew 9. If you don’t have your Bible with you today, you should be able to follow along by turning to pg. 687 in the Bibles located in the back of the pews. I will be reading v. 1-8 of Matthew 9 from the ESV. “And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city. And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a
bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.’ And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’ But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Rise and walk”? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ - he then said to the paralytic – ‘Rise, pick up your bed and go home.’ And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.”

We’re going to look at this passage in terms of the three different responses to Jesus that Matthew records. There are three groups of people here who each respond differently to Jesus and so as we walk though this passage in more detail, we’re going to consider each one in turn. So without any further ado, let’s begin with the first group of people Matthew introduces us to, which are the paralytic and his friends. So in our first point this morning we see that...

1. The paralytic’s friends respond with active faith. (v. 1-2)

In last week’s passage Jesus took a boat to the other end of the Sea of Galilee, but was asked to leave by the inhabitants of that region after he cast a legion of demons out of a couple of men. These demons then entered a herd of pigs that subsequently made like lemmings and dashed off a cliff to their death, much to the great fear and financial loss of those who lived there. So having been asked to leave we’re told in v. 1, “And getting into a boat he crossed over and came to his own city,” by which Matthew is referring to the city of Capernaum. While Jesus was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, at some point near the start of his public ministry Jesus made the small fishing village of Capernaum his home base of operations.

Now look at v. 2. “And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.’” Matthew is a bit of an editor and he frequently leaves out some of the details that the other gospel accounts provide. So to flesh this out a little bit more please turn to Mark 2 with me for a moment and let me read v. 1-5 so we can paint a more detailed picture of what is taking place here. So in Mark 2:1-5 it says this...

“And when he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “My son, your sins are forgiven.”

So Mark tells us that Jesus is at home and eventually word spreads that he’s back in town and so a huge crowd gathers, such that there was no room. As a result, it was a “you snooze, you lose” situation for anybody who came late because there was no way to force yourself through the crowd of people in order to get inside. So when these men carrying their paralytic friend arrive, they found they were plumb out of luck in terms of getting in any normal entrance.
But then they hatched an idea. Going to plan B, they climbed up on top of the flat roof and started digging through the clay and tile roof until they created a hole large enough to be able to lower their paralytic friend down into the house, right in front of Jesus.

I imagine that once everyone realized this house was about to get an unwanted skylight in the middle of the living room and saw this man being lowered down, they wondered what Jesus would do. So as the dust settles and the paralytic man is safely lowered to the floor, Jesus makes an incredibly surprising statement. At the end of v. 2 of Matthew 9, Jesus says, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

Now this is surprising for two reasons. First, this paralytic man wasn’t being brought there to have Jesus forgive his sins. Everybody and their brother knew why this man was brought there: it was so Jesus would heal him. So you can imagine some people were thinking, “Um, Jesus… I think you’re missing the point of this paralyzed man - hint, hint - being placed in front of you.” But even more surprising is the utterly outrageous thing Jesus says. Jesus looks the man in the eye and says “Your sins are forgiven.” Obviously that’s only the prerogative of God, so you can imagine what kind of stir that caused, but more on that in a little bit.

For now, I want to focus on what Matthew tells us Jesus saw in these men. In the middle of v. 2 Matthew says that, “Jesus saw their faith.” These men responded to what they had heard about Jesus with faith. But it’s important for us to recognize that when it says, “Jesus saw their faith” it wasn’t because Jesus had x-ray vision and could somehow see faith inside of them as if it was some hidden microchip implanted beneath their skin. He saw their faith in their actions. Jesus saw what everyone else present could plainly see: they were so certain of Jesus’ power to heal their friend that they refused to allow any hindrance to prevent them from bringing him before Jesus.

This reminds me of the passage in James 2 where in talking about the relationship between faith and works, he says in v. 18, “I will show you my faith by my works.” Faith is not an invisible entity. It’s not some mysterious element hidden inside you. Faith is something you can see because it always displays itself in concrete action. Whether that is love towards others, acts of grace and kindness, forgiveness towards those who have sinned against you, struggling against sin and striving for holiness and obedience to God’s Word in daily life, faith can be seen by what we do. If it’s not evident, then it’s not present. What you really believe is plainly seen by what you say and do.

So what about you? Can people see your faith? Is it evident in your words and actions? I recall a question I heard many years ago that I thought was worth considering and it was this: if you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Could a lawyer put together a case to prove that beyond any reasonable doubt that you are a follower of Christ? What evidence from this past week would be strong enough to demonstrate you indeed love Jesus and believe he’s your Lord and Savior? Faith can be seen: Jesus saw it in these men and he can see it in each of us in our words and deeds if we genuinely have it.
Moving back to our passage now, Jesus does not leave their faith unrewarded. He said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Seek and you will find” and these men are about to find Jesus ready to give them even more than they imagined. He encourages this paralyzed man with the gentle words, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” More than healing of the body, this young man needs healing of the soul, which Jesus gladly offers. But not everyone is happy about this offer. Some eyebrows are raised at this comment and that brings us to the second response to Jesus we find in this passage. So our second point this morning is to observe how...

2. The scribes respond with self-righteous judgment. (v. 3-7)

At this point Jesus is attracting quite a following and so the Jewish religious leaders start to investigate this itinerant preacher who has been stirring up the masses up in Galilee. As the religious guardians of orthodox teaching and righteous behavior for the Jews, they needed to check out this Jesus fellow they heard so much about in order to make sure he wasn’t “coloring outside the lines” in terms of his little ministry. And what they hear Jesus say on this occasion validates their suspicions about him.

Jesus claimed to have the authority to forgive the sins of this paralyzed man, and so not surprisingly Matthew tells us in v. 3. “And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’” Now the scribes and Pharisees get a bad rap in the gospels and rightfully so, but they aren’t all knuckleheads. They are dead-on correct in their assessment here. Only God can forgive sins. Nobody else can do that. For a mere man to claim to do something that was God’s prerogative alone would be blasphemy. Or at least it would be blasphemy if Jesus was only a man as they assumed he was. But Jesus is no mere man.

Matthew gives us a hint of the divine nature of Jesus by telling us Jesus knew that these thoughts were rolling around in their heads. Look at v. 4 with me. “But Jesus, knowing their thoughts said, ‘Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’ - he then said to the paralytic – ‘Rise, pick up your bed and go home.’ And he rose and went home.”

Jesus knows that anybody can say, “Your sins are forgiven” because there’s no way to prove it. How would you know whether it’s true or not? But to demonstrate that kind of divine authority by telling a paralyzed man to stand up and walk is proof that’s easy to see and much harder to argue with. If Jesus can do the harder task of healing with a mere word, then certainty he is able to do the easier task of forgiving sins.

So he tells the paralyzed man to pick up his bed and walk home. And that’s exactly what he does. He rose up and returned home with the praises of God upon his lips, as Luke tells us in his account. Let there be no doubt about it: the same Jesus who has the power to heal the lame also has the power to forgive sin. The divine power to do one is the same power that gives Jesus authority to do the other. The scribes received the proof that they needed. Jesus indeed has the power to grant the forgiveness of
sins because Jesus is not an ordinary man: he is God incarnate and has both the words and actions to prove it. The question now is how will they respond?

Sadly, we know the answer from the rest of the gospels. The scribes and Pharisees refused to believe. Jesus gave them ample evidence. He healed the sick, cured the blind and lame, drove out demons, raise people from the dead. This was a regular occurrence of his ministry performed publicly; it wasn’t hidden or done just for a select few to witness. Jesus knew that seeing is believing and so he publicly did miracle after miracle to demonstrate that he was the promised Messiah, the long-awaited heir of the Throne of David, who would rule over God’s people eternally. But instead of believing, the vast majority of the Jewish religious leaders hardened their hearts. They were tied to their traditions, their social and religious power, their status and respect they enjoyed before the people such that they simply wouldn’t risk the loss of prestige that would come should they admit Jesus was right and they were wrong.

Sometimes people are still like that today. There’s a loss that comes with following Jesus. You can’t continue to live life as you used to. Sin has to be repented of. You need to admit you were wrong about certain things. You’ll have to hold to beliefs that maybe you once publicly mocked. Your friends and family might ridicule you and reject you for going off the deep end and becoming one of those religious Jesus-freaks. For some, it’s a price too high to pay. The comfort of your lifestyle, the acceptance of your peers, and the respectability of your beliefs that mesh so well with the rest of popular culture are too cherished to abandon. So instead of believing the undeniable proof of who Jesus is, some people reject him. Some harden our hearts to him and explain away anything that might possibly speak of the historical and experiential reality of Christ’s cross and his resurrection. Sadly, the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees are still with us today because for many no proof is enough to dislodge their love of sin and the love of the praises of men so that they might turn and follow Jesus.

But there is one more group we need to consider from our passage this morning that gives the right kind of response to this incredible miracle they just witnessed. So the third and final response I want us to consider concerns the crowd of people who were present. So our third point is this:

3. The crowds respond with reverent praise. (v. 8)

There is a considerable contrast between how the scribes responded to Jesus and how the rest of the people did. Look at v. 8 with me. “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.”

The word translated as “afraid” is the Greek word phobeo which is where we get our English word “phobia” from, which means the fear of something, as in “arachnophobia,” the fear of spiders. Now I don’t think this means that the people present were terrified as much as they were awestruck and recognized in Jesus something well beyond the normal powers of a typical man. For Jesus to say “Get up and walk” to someone who had been crippled for years and whom they all knew because he was a part of their community, and then see this man stand up right before their very eyes and walk out
the door could be nothing short of astonishing. One trembles in the presence of the power of God so manifestly at work in their midst.

So this is not fear as in terror but fear as in deep awe and reverence. It’s the kind of feeling we’re to have when the Bible speaks about “the fear of the Lord;” not quaking in the boots but a sense of smallness, of weakness, of unworthiness you experience when in the presence of someone far greater and powerful than you. It is a fearful reverence that leads naturally praise and worship. Look again how Matthew puts it, “When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God…” They don’t flee the house in terror as if they just saw a ghost; their fear is a reverence that leads them to glorify God. It is a realization that the power and presence of God was in that moment among them and so they instinctively glorify God in praise to his powerful hand at work through Jesus to heal this man.

Now it’s unlikely they are at this point putting all the pieces about who Jesus really is together. They praise God because, as Matthew points out at the end of v. 9, they see this as God giving “…such authority to men.” To them, Jesus is just a man; a man who is anointed by God with power to heal with merely a word and who can apparently speak on behalf of God and proclaim forgiveness of sins, but still just a man. So the crowd’s response, while correct, isn’t entirely correct. If they knew who it was that was standing in their midst, they would have done far more than just glorify God in the abstract; they would have fallen down in worship to God incarnate who was standing before them. They would be more like Thomas, who after seeing the evidence of Jesus’ nail-pierced hands cried out to him, “My Lord and my God!” So the crowd has a good response, but it’s not quite the response Jesus is looking for. Not only should they praise God because of Jesus they should praise Jesus because he’s God.

**Conclusion:**

So then we have seen three responses to Jesus: the first being faith demonstrated in actions that were clearly observable. The second was doubt and disbelief, as the scribes in their self-righteous arrogance dismissed Jesus as nothing more than a blasphemer. The third was reverent praise towards God, but a reverence that still falls short because it only sees God working through Jesus the man, and not as Jesus the God-man who is the promised Immanuel, God-with-us, come to save sinners.

But the passage poses the question for all of us who hear it: How are you going to respond to Jesus? Jesus is making an astonishing claim in this healing account we’ve looked at today. He not only told a paralyzed man to get up and walk - which he did before a crowd of on-lookers - but he claimed to be able to forgive sins as well. Jesus is doing and saying things that are only true of God. So we have a choice: will we respond to him in faith as our Lord and our God or will we reject him as a lunatic or charlatan or just be admirers of him and regard him as simply a great prophet or miracle-worker. What say you?

For many of you here, you’ve answered that question by bowing your knee to Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You believe Jesus was God in the flesh, who died on the cross as an atonement for your sins to satisfy the wrath of God. You believe death did not have the
final say and that on Easter morning he rose again, that he ascended into heaven and will come again to judge the living and dead. For you, I hope this passage would be a joyful reminder of the power that Jesus has to forgive all of your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. May it help strengthen your faith, knowing that it is not because of what you have done, but because of Jesus alone that you are forgiven of your sin and stand pure and righteous in the sight of God our Father.

But perhaps there are some of you here who are still uncertain about Jesus. Maybe you are still crossing your arms and raising your eyebrows like the scribes and Pharisees when it comes to Jesus. To you I say “Don’t harden your heart. Investigate the claims of Jesus with an open mind. Ask the questions you have; God is not afraid of honest questions and genuine doubts. There are answers to be found. Many have started off doubting and dismissive of Christ only to find at the end of the road of reading and studying, of asking and seeking that from the soil of doubt bloomed the flower of faith.

And for those of you who maybe feel they have gone too far, that they have strayed into a realm of sin that has so damaged and destroyed them they think, “God could never come to love such as one as me,” I would remind you that Jesus was willing to forgive the sins of the paralyzed man even before he even asked for it. That’s how wide the arms of Jesus are. He’s ready to forgive even before you’re ready to ask. That same Jesus we read about in Matthew is present still today to heal and forgive anyone who seeks it. No one has gone so far that the love of Christ can’t rescue you. All you need to do is come to him and ask in faith to receive it.

Let’s close now with a word of prayer as we address the Lord Jesus together. So please bow your heads with me as I pray.

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