

## Choosing Faith Over Fear and Life Over Religion

### **Bill:**

The title we have given this time today is “Faith Over Fear and Abundant Life Over Religion.” I think this is the primary message to be derived from the passage in the Gospel of John we are up to for today.

I think it might be best just to read this story, talk a bit about our context and, then, make some observations about how this story might be relevant for us.

Let me get into it this way:

During the time that Jesus was alive and having his ministry, he was frequently obnoxious and an “in-your-face” kind of guy. He is in this story. People would try to confront and challenge him and he would dish it right back. For example, once a member of the religious establishment tried to trip Jesus up by asking him which was the most important law, or commandment, for Jews to follow. They had a lot of laws and observing them strictly, as you’ll see in the story we’ll read today was important. Breaking a law was a bad thing. Break some of them and you could be put to death. In the case I’m thinking about, Jesus ask his protagonist what he thought the most important laws were. The man said the great laws were two: To love God with all you’ve got and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. Jesus told him that he had gotten it right. But, who, asked the protagonist, is my neighbor? Whereupon Jesus tells the story we are all familiar with as the “parable of the good Samaritan.” This story infuriated people so much they wanted to kill Jesus - which they would eventually do.

So with the story you are about to hear. We don't know precisely what prompted the creation of this parable. We can guess some of the circumstances. The Johannine community of Jesus followers was a community of people who attracted others because they were fearless, joyful, loving, and generous - among other things. They were persecuted not only by the Roman government for not giving allegiance to Caesar but also by the former Jewish community that they had been part of.

So someone might have asked, "Who is this Jesus fellow that you follow and what is his relevance to me?"

Keep in mind also that the time in which this story was created was very like the time in which we live - a time of great division and controversy. This story is a parable about that controversy and, because Jesus is such a law-breaker, it begins to prepare the way for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Here is the story:

Soon another Feast came around and Jesus was back in Jerusalem. Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there was a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, with five alcoves. Hundreds of sick people - blind, crippled, paralyzed - were in these alcoves. One man had been an invalid there for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him stretched out by the pool and knew how long he had been there, he said, "Do you want to get well?"

The sick man said, "Sir, when the water is stirred, I don't have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in."

Jesus said, "Get up, take your bedroll, start walking." The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off.

That day happened to be the Sabbath. The Jews stopped the healed man and said, “It’s the Sabbath. You can’t carry your bedroll around. It’s against the rules.”

But he told them, “The man who made me well told me to. He said, ‘Take your bedroll and start walking.’”

They asked, “Who gave you the order to take it up and start walking?” But the healed man didn’t know, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd.

A little later Jesus found him in the Temple and said, “You look wonderful! You’re well! Don’t return to a sinning life or something worse might happen.”

The man went back and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. That is why the Jews were out to get Jesus—because he did this kind of thing on the Sabbath.

But Jesus defended himself. “My Father is working straight through, even on the Sabbath. So am I.”

That really set them off. The Jews were now not only out to expose him; they were out to kill him. Not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was calling God his own Father, putting himself on a level with God.

### **Holly:**

Bill has pointed out many times how similar the times we are living in today seem to the early Christian movement in which the Johanine community formed. This story has three primary threads for me, and is, in a broad sense about moving from death to life. The threads are:

- 1) Languishing
- 2) Fierce love
- 3) Choice

Just under a year ago, the NYT published an article titled “There’s a Name for the Blah You’re Feeling: It’s Called Languishing.” Psychologist named it the dominant emotion of 2021. It’s not quite depression. Not quite hopeless. It *is* somewhat joyless and aimless, stagnate and empty. It is the absence of well-being. The article states: “It feels as if you’re muddling through your days, looking at your life through a foggy windshield.”

How many of us wore sweatpants or pajamas on the bottom with a blouse on top for the last year plus? How many of us drank coffee well into the afternoon or forgot what day it was from time to time? How many of us let that well intentioned sourdough starter go bad or our fabulous ideas for doing creative projects with our kids 3 times a week fall by the wayside? We’ve dealt with a lot of intense fear and grief and confusion over the last 22 months, not just because of covid.

I saw Trevor Noah live recently, and he made the analogy to the end of a war.

This iconic photo taken on V-J day in 1945 echoes American sentiments at the end of a long, horrific, and uncertain time...but there was an end. People got to celebrate and wave their white kerchiefs in the air...they got to kiss complete strangers - something we can’t even dream of doing right now, let alone hug them. Trevor Noah said we haven’t had our armistice day, our chance to wave our arms in ecstasy and run through the streets. We just keep plodding forward wondering when this will end and trying to live some kind of normal life in spite of it.

I completely relate to languishing. I feel as if the last two years have been dog years, and in the context of the story, I wouldn't doubt you for a minute if you told me it had actually been 38! The man in the story was languishing. It is said that one of the best strategies for managing emotions is naming them - it helps us to find resonance in the body and to discharge them. Many have been taught to minimize or ignore them all together, to respond with the very benign, "I'm just fine!" When asked. The man by the pool is one such person - he is complicit with his own suffering, likely in denial of what got him here. Denial may have been protective at one point, but now it keeps him separate and alone.

Sanford asserts that he suffers from a kind of psychosomatic illness in which physical symptoms - including paralysis and convulsions - that mask emotional distress. The body speaks what the mouth cannot.

Sanford also mentions psychologist Fritz Kunkel's work on ego defenses that limit development. The Four types are:

The Star - A gifted child with indulging parents who is used to being the best. As they grow up, they primarily fear failure or ordinariness and miss out on being loved for who they are.

The Clinging Vine - a shy child with indulging partners who avoids responsibility by being dependent and misses out on initiative and confidence. They grow up to fear abandonment.

The Bully or Tyrant - an energetic kid with demanding parents. Trust is broken by cruelty, and they achieve power to survive. As a grown up, they hide insecurities, are "right," and fear loss of control.

The Turtle - a shy kid with demanding parents. Life is overwhelming and scary, so they withdraw to protect. They hide

from life and lack ambition. They fear being challenged and found inadequate.

The paralytic is most likely a Turtle who has never really chosen life. We see this in his response to the authorities once Jesus commands him to walk.

**Bill:**

I want to make some general observations about the story.

The paralyzed man is a stand-in for the Jewish community that could not or would not adapt to the expansive vision of life and living that Jesus presented.

You notice that in the story the paralyzed man did not try facilitate his own healing. Not only did he not seek Jesus out - Jesus had come to him - but also for thirty eight years he had shown no initiative to better his circumstance. He demonstrates a chronic inability to seize the opportunity to move into new life. Further, he turns on the one who healed him. This is a parable, you remember, about the synagogue community. And, about us.

You remember that the first “sign story” was the water turned into wine, right? Here you have water again. It was used for the rite of purification but the water couldn’t heal this man. Jesus could. We’ll get into miracles later.

Jesus disappears. The religious authorities show up and confront the man who is carrying his bedroll and say, “What in tarnation do you think you are doing?” “Oh, I’m not doing anything. I’m just following orders.” How much tragedy has been done in the world by people who were just doing what they were told to do? There have been many research projects done to show that even

people with high moral character can easily give-in to authority when they fear the consequences that might occur if they don't.

Another observation is this: new life and wholeness threaten religious rules of the past.

Then, there are these lines in the story:

A little later Jesus found him in the Temple and said, "You look wonderful! You're well! Don't return to a sinning life or something worse might happen."

I want to be very clear, crystal clear, that Jesus never at any point connects something tragic that happens in someone's life with how they behave. What he is saying in this instance is, "Don't sink back into your fears and behaviors of the past. Choose faith over fear. Choose life over religion."

Well, the authorities didn't like that. Their entire religious structure was built on the belief that no one could be made whole by breaking the rules. But, I want you to notice that over and over and over again Jesus deliberately broke the rules. Indeed, it was Jesus as the rule breaker that would come to be one of the ways the people in this Johannine community would come to understand the death of Jesus.

Part of the message of the Gospel of John is that the light of the world is extinguished by darkness in a world where God has been reduced to rules or to any of the false beliefs we have about God - things like we understand God, God's on our side, or any other idolatrous nonsense. The people in the Johannine community affirmed that Jesus is part of who God is and that God cannot be contained in any form created by human minds or hands.

## **Holly:**

When I look at the arc of Jesus' teachings, they seem to be about choosing a full and meaningful life, practicing unconditional love, and bringing forth the light of the true self.

Unconditional love is not just soft and mushy. It is not permissive but forthright and bold. It is fierce, the kind of love that looks at us and says, "Go on, Man. Get up and walk." Sometimes we need that push.

Fritz Kunkel also wrote about the importance of feeling connected, part of a whole to development.

"The real Self," he wrote, "is not 'I' but 'We.'" We exist in relation to one another. Community shapes identity, and ideally a community loves us into being. When the community languishes, the individual does too.

A healthy community is not complicit with anything other than the expression of one's true self. This is what I love about Jesus - he has this remarkable ability to simultaneously accept people exactly where they are and refuse to let them be anything less than who they are meant to be. Of course we are all works in progress, but the invitation issued here is for us to actively participate in the process of becoming whole. Jesus was stubbornly committed to this kind of fierce love. "I will not let you be anything less than your Self. Now get up and walk." Jesus initiates and brings forth healing from within.

I am going to guess that hundreds of people were aware of the paralytic by the pool. Maybe at first they engaged him or pitied him or even feared him, but eventually they must have learned to ignore him. He was complicit with his circumstances and so were they. We probably all know a few Turtles. We might also behave

as turtles toward the larger problems in society. Sometimes we don't know how to engage or where to step in, or the problem feels too big, so we give up.

I read a story recounted by Austin Channing Brown about an interracial group of college girls who did a civil rights bus tour. They were paired up, one White and one Black student. After one particular stop, a place that documented the history of lynching, the tensions were high and the feelings strong.

She writes:

“There was no sound as we walked through the exhibit. We could barely breathe, let alone speak.

When we climbed back on the bus, all that we heard were sniffles. The emotion was thick. It was as if no time had passed between the generation in the pictures and the one sitting on that bus. It was all so real.

The first students to break the silence were white. ‘I didn’t know this even happened.’ ‘It’s not my fault; I wasn’t there.’ They reached for anything that would distance themselves from the pain and anger of the moment; anything to ward off the guilt and shame, the shock and devastation.

Angry, hurt, and defensive words travelled back and forth, hurling past one another, and the hoped for understanding and compassion was slipping away.

Until one White girl stood up and exhaled deeply. She said:

“I don’t know what to do with what I’ve learned. I can’t fix your pain, and I can’t take it away, but I can see it. And I can work for the rest of my life to make sure your children don’t have to

experience this pain...Doing nothing is no longer an option for me.”

This was a different kind of step toward intergenerational healing that begins with a willingness to see. Is this not exactly what Jesus does? He sees the man languishing by the pool.

Concerns about division and injustice were written on over half the cards submitted a few weeks back. The problems we face are huge and weighty and very, very real. Our job is to deepen our awareness and begin to take steps that pull us toward healing the heart of the world. In the process, ‘I’ heals ‘We’.

Jesus’ superpower is facing pain and seeing what truly is, seeing the light inside of even the most hopeless situations. Trauma and pain always hold the possibility for healing.

Doing nothing was not an option for Jesus either.

**Bill:**

The cured man in this parable chose the security of religious rules rather than stepping into the larger life offered by following the way and teachings of Jesus.

One of the reasons, not the only one to be sure, I have turned both to psychology and Eastern religions is that psychology teaches us about the ego and Eastern religions teach us that not being led by the ego is the path to enlightenment.

Our egos are very insecure. Mine is so my projection is that must be true for you as well.

A man came to Buddha one day with an offering of flowers in his hands. When he arrived in front of the Buddha, Buddha looked up at him and smiled and said, “Drop it!”

The man was stunned and then realized the Buddha meant to drop the flowers in his left hand because it was considered uncouth to offer a gift to someone with your left hand. So he dropped those flowers.

The Buddha looked up at him and smiled and said, “Drop it!”

This time he dropped the flowers in his right hand and stood empty-handed before the Buddha who once again looked at him and smiled and said, “Drop it!”

Perplexed the man asked, “What it is I’m supposed to drop?”

“Not the flowers, son, just the one who brought them.”

Our egos are very insecure. They want clarity, authority, and control. Sometimes they want these things no matter what the cost. A careful study of religion will reveal that over and over Jesus and his teachings have been the victim of religion. It is a battle that has been fought again and again.

I really don’t think that anyone who has found Jesus as the teacher within would say that people who are in the grouping that embraces the LBGT+ community aren’t welcome for full participation in all levels of the community that Jesus calls people into. Yet, look at the squabbles that have divided and continue to divide “the church.”

I want to acknowledge that stepping into what I might call the “post-religious freedom of tomorrow” is never easy.

The man in this story for over thirty-eight years never found the courage to stand up. I've recounted in this class several times being found by what I describe as some of the most powerful words written in the English language. They were written by Paul Tillich and are found in a book of his sermons titled "The Courage to Be." Specifically Tillich was talking about that story-line that I mentioned to you two weeks ago. The ego wants safety and security by following the rules and believing the right stuff. Jesus never taught anything like that. He taught that life is found in loving and we are set free to so love because we are accepted.

So ask yourself some simple questions: Where do I need to grow up? Where do I need to step into my life? What fear(s) will I need to confront in doing so? Is that fear realistic or is it from some earlier time in my development? And, perhaps most importantly, what is the price I will pay for not growing up?

Which leads me to say this one other thing about this story.

Though the signs in the book of signs, and there are seven of them - the next will be the feeding of the multitude, though these signs are designed to say that in Jesus this community found light, life, nurture, joy, community, etc.; the writers of John are also very clear that this light is extinguished by darkness in a world where God has been reduced to rules. Great music in life is played by people who know how and who are willing to improvise. The practicing of scales and learning etudes, the long hours of practice are essential. But if you stay in that box, you'll never play your own music.

### **Holly:**

The last important message from this story that Bill just alluded to with some simple questions is about personal choices.

When faced with difficulty, will we make choices that lead to an enlarged being or a constricted one?

Everything arises; everything falls away. From the big to the small. Each breath arises, each one falls away...right up until the last one.

That there is an uncertain end can be motivating or paralyzing. It can make us nihilistic fatalists. But it can also make us hopeful fools, active participants in the multilayered fabric that keeps on and on and on...until it too falls away. And...Something else will rise up in its place. Whether you are a nihilist or a hopeful, you are part of the fabric.

We don't have a choice about physical death; we don't even have a choice about all the circumstances of our lives; but we do have a choice about how we participate in life and what we pass on to future generations.

We would be remiss, here, not to mention Thich Nhat Hanh, who died Friday. His teachings around Interbeing started us off in March 2020. He brought deeper levels of consciousness and principles of engaged Buddhism to the west. He says, "This body of mine will disintegrate, but my actions will continue me... If you think I am only this body, then you have not truly seen me. When you look at my friends, you see my continuation. When you see someone walking with mindfulness and compassion, you know he is my continuation. I don't see why we have to say "I will die," because I can already see myself in you, in other people, and in future generations."

Similarly, Jesus lives on with his teachings and consciousness raising questions.

“What do you want?” He asks the paralytic. What kind of world do you want to live in, and what choices will you make to usher it forth? We stand at this precipice in small and big ways all the time. We just need to take that first wobbly step forward.

I read this recently:

“I love it when people say ‘baby steps!’ To imply they’re being tentative when actually baby steps are a great, unbalanced, wholehearted, enthusiastic (and brave!) lurch into the unknown.”

It is so easy to get paralyzed - thought patterns can stop us from living an enlarged life. There is so much capturing our attention in the world. Many of you wrote of concerns very near to the heart - health, jobs, security, purpose. Others of you wrote about the big societal concerns - democracy, injustice, poverty, environmental destruction.

Any one of these could overwhelm us, but I think we are up to the challenge. Recall that the other side of languishing is flourishing...and we can choose to flourish in small and big ways. I’ll close with Tony Kushner’s version of “get up and walk.”

“When the supernova comes to get us we don’t want to be disappointed in ourselves. We should hope to be able to say proudly to that angel of death, “Hello supernova, we have been expecting you, we know all about you, because in our schools we teach science and not creationism, and so we have been expecting you, everywhere everyone has been expecting you, except Texas. And we would like to say, supernova, in the moment before we are returned by your protean fire to our previous inchoate state, clouds of incandescent atomic vapor, we'd like to declare that we have tried our best and worked hard to make a good and just and free and peaceful world, a world that is better for our having been here, at least we believe it is.”

**Bill:**

The Johannine community was in a struggle with the church that birthed them, if you'll permit that language. I'm sure there were lots of family conflicts about the positions they took. Jesus was good about stirring up that kind of trouble. And, they lived in the brutal heartlessness of the Roman Empire of their time.

I mentioned that this parable raises the red flag about the death of Jesus that is coming. We live in a context so similar. The Methodist denomination is on the precipice of a split. So seems our country. People on both the right and left are fearful of what is coming. We are already in a place that I never, never imagined would be possible.

Some of you are old enough, many of you are not, to remember a movement started by a man whose name was Norman Vincent Peale - the Power of Positive Thinking. His book by the same name was published when I was in high school and stayed on the best-seller list for four years!

I don't know what nursery rhymes were read to you when you were a child but one of my favorites was "the little engine that could." Planted the seed: try hard enough, long enough and you can get up any hill.

Speaking of hills, that's our cultural history. A city set on a hill. The original "optimistic society." If there is something we want, just take it: it's our destiny. One of the mottos of the '60s was "personal fulfillment." American Christianity, which I need to be real clear is NOT the faith of Jesus, is about prosperity and winning and being "safe and secure from all alarms" as the old hymn goes. American Christianity reflects the context in which it has been shaped.

Truth demands that we live each day keenly aware of the impermanence and fragility of our selves and all of our constructs. I'm not saying to live morbidly. Facing his death head on from the beginning, Jesus shows a model of what it means to live honestly and with compassion. Over and over he and his first followers invited people and invite us to choose faith over fear and faithfulness to the values of the God of Jesus over tribal loyalties.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: You carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.