Sunday, October 17, 1976
THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THOUGHTS
Matthew 13:53-58

We've all heard a lot about the power of positive thinking and what it can do. A book on positive thinking has been a best-seller for years. The message put simply is, "You can, if you will only believe you can." Positive thinking when applied in the right way does have its value.

What many of us have failed to take into account, however, is the opposite — the power of negative thoughts. It can do us in, and it can have an effect far beyond us in a negative way. A prophecy of doom is more likely to fulfill itself than a more hopeful prediction. Gloomy talk can bring on depression — economic or psychological--quicker than cheerful chatter can dispel it. Predictions of military defeat, social panic, or rioting in the streets are likely to be fulfilled on schedule, whereas painful embarrassment is more likely to be the lot of those who insist that nothing can go wrong. It seems easier for us human beings to believe the worst than to believe the best. That's the basis for "Murphy's Law," "If anything can go wrong, it will."

In the story read as our scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, we see the power of negative thoughts at work.

Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth, after having some success in his ministry in other places. He had gathered 12 disciples and a number of others had also become his followers. People were drawn to him because of the wisdom of his teaching and because he healed them of their diseases. Undoubtedly some of the news of his teaching and miracles had reached his hometown.

But Jesus didn't get a good reception in Nazareth. To be sure a number of people were amazed at his teaching and his wisdom. In fact, they had difficulty believing that a hometown boy could be so wise. They asked, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?" They had known him as the carpenter's son. They knew his mother Mary and his brothers and sisters, and they found nothing remarkable about his family. Many of them had known Jesus as a little boy and there was nothing special about him.

They were filled with negative thoughts about Jesus. Resentment and jealously blocked any feelings of appreciation for what Jesus might have to offer them. Thus, they were not open to see and experience him for what he was. Negative thoughts do that. They block us, form a wall around us and effectively keep out any new perceptions and experiences. We become closed, narrow, stubborn human beings.

Furthermore, the power of negative thoughts has its effect on others. In the case of Jesus and the hometown folks, the Bible reports, "He did not do many might works there because of their unbelief. One of the other gospels puts it even stronger, "He could do no mighty works there be-cause of their unbelief." The power of negative thoughts.

What caused the unbelief in these hometown people, their negative thoughts about Jesus? And what causes ours?

1. Note first the connection between familiarity and unbelief or negative thoughts. The people of Nazareth had seen Jesus grow up. Now since they were familiar with part of his past, they

thought they knew all about him in the present. Familiarity had dulled their sensitivity, their awareness of anything new or different.

Bernard Shaw, the writer, used to say, “The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them.” The townspeople of Nazareth were not like Shaw’s tailor, rather they were measuring Jesus only by their previous association with him. They were sure they were familiar with him. They had already formed an opinion and so were not open to any new awareness.

In many ways, familiarity can dull our sensitivity. It can and does happen in many ways. I worry about our whole society in this regard. For example, ever since the end of the second world war, there has been a continuing and increasing tendency to hold life cheaply, and the more it happens, the more we get used to it, the less we are likely to question what’s going on, but rather to accept things as they are.

The ultimate test of a civilized society is its sensitivity to the things that give value and color to life. Yet there has been a grim adjustment to things we have no business adjusting to. Brutality and violence have become a wild infection in almost every aspect of national life. Too many of us are no longer shocked by anything because we are so used to it. And that happens we’ve lost our sensitivity.

What is true of brutality and violence is also true of pornography. The trouble with the kind of wide-open pornography that is rampant today is not that it corrupts, but that it desensitizes; not that it unleashes the passions, but that it cripples the emotions; not that it encourages a mature attitude, but that it is a reversion to infantile obsessions_; not that it removes the blinders but that it distorts the view. In pornography, only one aspect of human nature is emphasized, and that’s a distortion. So, what we have is not liberation, but dehumanization!

So, beware the danger of familiarity. It can lead to unbelief, negative thoughts, and lessened sensitivity.

2. Note second, that in addition to familiarity dulling our sensitivity, resentment and jealousy also do the same, and create more negative thoughts. This too was part of the problem with the people in Jesus’ hometown. They were jealous and took offense at Jesus. This blocked any openness toward him, and it blocked any sense of appreciation.

Their negative thoughts kept them from seeing Jesus as he really was and blocked his power as well. Even if Jesus had done some mighty works, they wouldn’t have believed they happened or missed seeing them totally.

Unbelief has a power all its own and not only limits us but affects others adversely as well, just as belief has a power of its own and affects us and others positively.

So, beware the power of negative thoughts, they can cause more trouble for you and for others than you first realize.

On the other side of the coin is the amazing power of belief and what it does for us and for others around us.

In the area of medicine and healing, for example, long experience has taught physicians that a patient's faith in his or her doctor is essential if healing is to occur. Much of this faith grows out of the patient's recognition of the doctor's empathy or love — when the sick person senses that the physician really cares about him or her as a human being and not just another case.

Furthermore, the body will exert all sorts of magic in its own behalf if a person genuinely believes he or she is going to get well and wants to get well.

Consider the phenomenon of the placebo and how it works. The patient does not know he is receiving innocuous medication and his mind and body tend to act as though real drugs have been administered. The medica literature abounds with stories of people who recovered swiftly from illness after having taken placebos.

We also know that if a doctor gives a patient confidence in a certain remedy, there is a stronger likelihood that improvement will take place. In the past therefore, one of the reasons that rather strange medicines which were given for healing often worked was because the doctor be-lieved in them and the patient believed in them.

Most medical doctors have had experiences of achieving impressive results with a certain drug, so long as the doctor believed in it himself. But as soon as he has some failures and begins to doubt the drug's remedial powers, the results on patients begin to tail off, and often in a few months the wonder drug is as far as that practitioner is concerned, discarded, and forgotten.

That should not surprise us. Powerful forces are at work. The confidence of a doctor in a certain kind of treatment is often transmitted to the patient and this in itself is an aid to the patient's recovery.

Thus, just as our unbelief or our negative thoughts can block power, so can our belief and our appreciation and sensitivity help positive power to flow, not only in ourselves, but in others as well. Jesus could do no mighty works in his hometown because of their unbelief. In other parts of the gospels, the opposite is the case — we find Jesus able to do many mighty works because of the belief and support of those around him.

Now this morning, I want you to take a more active part in the rest of the sermon, more than just listening. Since as we have seen, if the hometown folks had let themselves be more open, more aware of Jesus; if they had taken new measurement of him and had reported to him, not only· their resentment, but also their appreciation, miracles, would have occurred.

Resentments and negative thoughts come easily to most of us. Therefore, let's see this morning if for a few minutes we can find some new appreciations of persons so that power can be released.

(You can close your eyes as you try this in a moment or leave them open — whatever works best for you.)

Go first now in your imagination to the people you live with — your parents, or your children, or your spouse, or brother or sister, or roommate, or if you live alone, go to one of your close friends — someone you are very familiar with. Go in y0ur imagination now to one of them and tell him or her what you appreciate about him or her. Then listen in your imagination ·for any response.

(silence for about 30 seconds)

Now go to a person in this church or someone else and tell that person in your imagination what you appreciate about him or her. Try to pick a person against whom you have some resentment. Wait for any response!

(silence for about 30 seconds)

Now go to a person at work, if you work outside the home, and tell that person what you appreciate about him or her. Become aware of that person in your imagination in a new way.

(silence for about 30 seconds)

Go now to a person from the past, perhaps someone who has died or has moved away, and in your imagination tell that person what you appreciate about him or her.

(silence for about 30 seconds)

Imagine now Jesus Christ coming down the road from Nazareth. Go to him and tell him what you appreciate about him and wait for any response.

(silence for about 30 seconds)

Now tell yourself what you appreciate about yourself

(silence for about 30 seconds and then end with a brief prayer)