I’m calling this talk “Use Your Head - Live From Your Heart.”

I want to talk with you today about living from your heart. But, we have to use our brains to get there.

This talk is based on one of the questions that Jesus asked. It comes from one of the most overlooked, insofar as its metaphorical power is concerned, stories we have from the Jesus narratives. I’m going to read it to you from the Gospel of Mark and then we will talk about it. I want to urge you to use your heads and listen to this story as a parable told not by Jesus but about him. It may or may not have some roots in factuality.

As stunning as it is for some people to hear, most factuality about Jesus is lost. What we have about Jesus are stories and memories that have been held on to and shaped not because of their factuality but because of the encouragement these stories gave to the followers of Jesus to stay connected to each other through their memory of him and his teachings. The things they cherished were joy, love and freedom in this new realm of reality they experienced because of him. He called it the “rule of God.”
This is a story that appears in all four of the Gospels in Christian Scripture. Aspects of it are throughout the collected teachings of Jesus. We’ll talk about some of those and their relevance for us.

Again, try to hear this as a parable and not a news story. That is how it was originally intended.

Here is the story:

After a few days, Jesus returned to Capernaum, and word got around that he was back home. A crowd gathered, jamming the entrance so no one could get in or out. He was teaching the Word. They brought a paraplegic to him, carried by four men. When they weren’t able to get in because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic on his stretcher. Impressed by their bold belief, Jesus said to the paraplegic, “Son, I forgive your sins.”

Some religion scholars sitting there started whispering among themselves, “He can’t talk that way! That’s blasphemy! God and only God can forgive sins.” (Notice that these “religious scholars” are the ones to say that.)

Jesus knew right away what they were thinking, and said, “Why are you so skeptical? Which is simpler: to say to the paraplegic, ‘I forgive your sins,’ or say, ‘Get up, take your stretcher, and start walking’? Well, just so it’s clear that I’m the Son of Man
and authorized to do either, or both . . .” (he looked now at the paraplegic), “Get up. Pick up your stretcher and go home.” The man did it - got up, grabbed his stretcher, and walked out, with everyone there watching him. They rubbed their eyes, incredulous - and then praised God, saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this!”

The question in this story is, “Why do you think these things in your hearts?”

One of the things that is in this story and something to which we will return before we’re done here today is that the followers of Jesus continued an emphasis of his. Namely, that people, in this case the religious leaders, could look at things and not see them. They were not looking with open minds and hearts. All they could see was a departure from their tradition. They held it that both they and their tradition were everything. The need of this man and his need to be restored to a place in the community were nothing to them. What mattered was their tradition.

That sort of blindness is all over our culture, especially organized religion, right now. We can be so easily blinded by power, position, possessions, tradition, institutional loyalty that we don’t see “what is.”

Because I have this passion for and commitment to religious literacy and because I am convinced that growing in religious
Literacy is essential to our spiritual growth, I want to say a bit more about what current religious and biblical scholarship are telling us about Jesus.

Even the Christian Scriptures are clear that Jesus was conceived before Mary and Joseph were married. What resulted from that were doubts about his paternity. This is something that dogged Jesus until the day he died.

It is safe to say that, divided as Christianity is, there is agreement that the formal doctrine of the church is that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” Clergy have been excommunicated for denying this. To this day belief in the virgin birth is a litmus test for whatever else a minister or spiritual teacher has to offer. Even after he had become a famous teacher, Jesus was mocked for being born as the result of fornication as it is put in John 8:41. The people of his own village called him “Mary’s son,” not Joseph.

Bruce Chilton says in his book that I have been referring to often lately, Rabbi Jesus, “Scholarship should explain both why Jesus was insulted for his allegedly irregular birth and why the legend developed that he was born of a virgin. By examining the ancient Jewish commitment to the maintenance of family lineage - which was the cultural context of Jesus’ birth - we can explain the charge of illicit conception and discover one of the most profound influences on Jesus’ personal development.”
Mary was likely some thirteen years old when the widower Joseph came to her village Nazareth. He was what is called a journey-man, a roofer, stonemason, carpenter, from nearby Bethlehem. Mary’s family had agreed to a contract of marriage with Joseph. But, Mary and Joseph were not living together when it became obvious that she was pregnant. Again, even though the story is wrapped with layers of legends, this is clear in the book of Matthew. The gossip and rumors were so great that Joseph brought Mary to Bethlehem of Galilee where he had lived with his first wife for the birth. Christmas cards make the location of the birth Bethlehem of Judea instead of Galilee. This has to do with the way Jews told stories and, eventually, wrote what would become Scripture.

The reason I’m bringing this up is to stress that from the beginning of his life Jesus negotiated the treacherous terrain between belonging to the people of God and ostracism in his own community among his own people. This made him particularly sensitive to the outcast. He would be ostracized by the children he grew up with and later, when he returned to Nazareth, by adults - meaning mostly men. This is one of the reasons he likely left home at a very young age - that and his attraction to John.

We have developed a mythic picture of Jesus, meek and mild, but if you read the narrative, Jesus spoke of children’s persistent squabbling, not their generosity or innocence.
In the Gospel of Luke Jesus is quoted as saying, “How can I account for the people of this generation? They’re like spoiled children complaining to their parents, ‘We wanted to skip rope and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk but you were always too busy.’ John the Baptizer came fasting and you called him crazy. The Son of Man came feasting and you called him a lush. Opinion polls don’t count for much do they? The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

To quote Chilton again: “Behind these words I see a small child, standing apart from other children, wishing to play but not being included, defensively ironic about the gang’s incapacity to agree on a game. Jesus was isolated not because he was precocious and learned, which is what Luke’s Gospel piously claims, but because he was (unaccepted because of his birth.)”

So in this story that we are looking at today, the first thing we see Jesus seeing is the love the paraplegic’s friends have for him that caused them to go to such lengths to get their friend to Jesus. The story isn’t about a medical magic trick that Jesus does. It is about love and people who don’t like, or are not comfortable with, the boundaries that love can cause people to cross. For Jesus such boundary-crossing, that is, forgiving love, is not only moving and rare but the secret to life itself.

The religious elites who witness this beautiful event are appalled. Jesus, according to the story, can see their resentment. He knows what they are thinking. Again, this gets us into one of
those Jesus paradoxes, right? I have a t-shirt that says on it, “I can tell people are judgmental just by looking at them.”

Jesus doesn’t yell at them or criticize them for their hatred. He simply asks, “What are you thinking in your hearts?”

Why doesn’t Jesus say, “What are you thinking in your minds?” Because it is the heart that Jesus stresses over and over again in his teachings. “Blessed are the pure in heart” was one of the sayings the early followers collected and called, “The Sermon on the Mount.” Both Jewish and Christian writings are overflowing with the use of the word “heart.” I have a huge book in my library, “Young’s Analytical Concordance of the Bible,” that lists the usage of every word in the Bible. The word “heart” is used, by my count, well over a thousand times.

It is our heart that energizes what we say and do. If you read carefully the teachings of Jesus he says over and over that the heart is the source of violence, injustice, greed and cruelty. What we think, not with our heads, with our hearts is what fuels our attitudes and behavior toward others. We know this to be true. When we lose a loved one, we don’t complain that our minds are broken but our hearts are broken. When someone betrays us, we don’t complain about a wound in our brains but in our hearts.

This past week we celebrated, nationally, the anniversary of D-Day. That was the first step toward the liberation of those who were in concentration camps. One of the things that came to
light afterwards was the witness of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who was killed in Auschwitz at the age of twenty-nine. If you don’t know her story, look it up. It is most impressive. In her diaries, “An Interrupted Life,” she wrote, “I want to be the thinking heart of the barracks.”

I’m suggesting that followers of Jesus assume that it is our role and goal to become “the thinking heart of the world.” Which means that we work at cultivating and expressing, forgiveness, healing and compassion.

That is what this story is about. These friends have already expressed forgiveness and acceptance in the very act of getting the man to Jesus. Remember, this is a parable. Which makes it far more powerful than if it were a “news report.”

You have to wonder, why don’t the religious leaders respond this way to the marginalized man?

I have this intense love/hate relationship to - and, here, words fail me - “the church”? but that’s not quite true; “organized religions”? that’s not quite true either; - “Christianity”? who even knows what that is any more; etc. The longer I have stayed on the journey and the more deeply I have delved into it, the more convinced I have become that it is hard to pin a religion down. In a way that is no such thing as “a religion” as much as there are “religious people.”
Early in my life I was handed a religious language much as I was handed English to speak. I have been so thoroughly immersed in that language that I can’t wash the smell of it off of or out of my life. Yet, I have been exposed to something that resonates with my heart. That is one of the things I have learned, and would offer this to you today as something you can “take away” from this time, trust what resonates with your heart. Not your mind. I mean, use your mind. That use of your mind means also being aware of what your biases and prejudices are.

There is a wonderful definition of spirituality in Barbara Brown Taylor’s book “Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others.” It is this: “Spirituality is the active pursuit of the God you didn’t make up.”

The Greek philosopher Xenophanes, who lived six centuries before Jesus, said, “If horses had gods, they would look a lot like horses.” I would say, ask a person what they believe about God and their answer will say a lot more about them than about God.

So let’s come clean about the fact that all of us stick very closely to sources that support what we already believe. I had someone say to me a few days after Michael Morwood was here, “I really liked what he had to say and I really do believe that is the direction in which we are and should be headed but I really want to hang on to my myths just a little bit longer.” Let’s all be that
honest about what we believe about all sorts of things. It is hard, more often than not, to let new light in.

The question I am working with is: how do we get beyond this? How do any of us learn to be open to “the God we did not make up”?

I began to be aware of my own struggles with organized Christianity decades ago. That struggle likely played a key part in my getting fired from teaching in seminary. As I was involved in the conflict that led to my being fired from that teaching job I thought I was to spend my life doing, one of my professor colleagues said to me, among a number of other things, “The church is like Noah’s ark. If it weren’t for the storm outside, you couldn’t stand the stink inside.”

By the way, the Noah’s ark story is probably the worst story to teach children in relation to God ever created.

It is impossible to live in this world and speak “language.” One has to speak “a language.” The same is true when it comes to speaking religious and spiritual values and truths. We have to speak “a language.” And, we have to learn to speak it well before we can learn to speak to someone else. I have come to believe that the more literate consciousness we can bring to speaking our own religious and spiritual language that will enhance how we can hear and understand the religious and spiritual languages spoken by others.
I stick with speaking the Jesus story because I believe that in it there is more than enough to challenge me as to what it means to be and become a center of freedom and love.

For example, what better way for me to relate to the God of Jesus, than to try - just for a few seconds - to love those religious elites in this story who condemned him. What better way for me to relate to the Divine Presence in whom all people live and move than to try to love - just for a few seconds - those who close the door in the face of my gay and lesbian sisters and brothers? That’s enough religious/spiritual agenda for me right there.

Also, I stick with learning to hear and to speak what Jesus has to say because, in my humble opinion, so many leading, at least visible and vocal voices that claim to speak for Jesus or the church, are getting his words so wrong. I am not being politically partisan when I say this: find me anything in the teaching of Jesus that agrees with the current political establishment in this country and I’ll buy your lunch.

Forgive the more than personal turn this talk is going to take now.

Because of the kind of insights brought to us by people like Ilia Delio, Michael Morwood, Brian Swimme and a host of others, we are having to rethink absolutely everything about religious
matters - God, Jesus, revelation, prayer, worship, religion itself. There may have been a time when religious people could talk comfortably and confidently about things like “answered prayer” and “finding and doing God’s will for my life.” But if there is no “god” up and out there who takes a stick and occasionally stirs up stuff on this tiny grain of sand, we better be careful, if we are going to speak with integrity, about such talk.

And yet, and yet, it is nothing short of a miracle to me that I get to be here doing this. There is, for me, such a fit between my deepest desires and what small talents I have for this that is seems like “God’s will.” That there is room for me in the house of Jesus, is for me a miracle. I know no celestial being pulled strings from up in the sky to make this happen.

When I used to supervise younger clergy, one of my first assignments to them was, “Get clear about the neurosis that attracted you to this job. Because it is just a job. If you come to think of yourself as God-like, some people will treat you as ‘god-like’ and then all hell will break loose.” That’s where all the sexual scandals come from. And the financial malfeasance. People begin to believe that the rules don’t apply to them.

At any rate, one of my passions from the beginning has been to make the house where Jesus teaches big enough for everyone to enter.
When I first started on this journey, that included including people of color.

I’ve always tried to use the very teachings I got from the church to back up my claims for inclusivity: the lion will lie down with the lamb, Paul’s teaching about male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free being together, how the test of how we love God will be seen in how we love our neighbor, in Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love, throughout the whole wide earth, etc.

I think we all mean it when we say at the beginning of our time together here: no matter who you are . . . you are welcome here. Yet, if you look around, we are pretty much alike. The psychological part of me knows that most of us are uncomfortable with differences - differences in race, ethnicity, age, theology, sexual orientation. Just this past week I read a statistic that says that only seven and a half percent of the over three hundred thousand Christian congregations in this country are multiracial and multicultural. Race is a huge issue in this country, on this globe, and seems to be growing more so. Yet, the worship hour of most churches, which is where Jesus is alleged to be teaching and healing, remain the most segregated hour in America. How can we dig a hole in the roof to let more people in?

The message of Jesus is clear. Everyone is welcome. This includes everyone regardless also of sexual orientation. I don’t
care what it says in Leviticus. I don’t care what Paul said - because he got it wrong. Everybody is to be included to where Jesus is.

The fact that so many people, many of you, say and know that I could not teach what I teach in most churches is a statement not about how radical I am but about how closed most churches are. Frankly, I don’t think I’m radical at all. Except in the true meaning of the word “radical” which means “to get at the root of something.”

“They brought a paraplegic to him, carried by four men. When they weren’t able to get in because of the crowd, they removed part of the roof and lowered the paraplegic on his stretcher.”

This is such a great story.

Imagine that you’re the paraplegic. You can barely get to Jesus on your own but you are carried there. I don’t know how you got here today but if you are one of the vast multitude who have been wounded by and/or shunned by the church and Ordinary Life gives you healing hope, give thanks for whatever brought you.

I think about the people in the story who are there to hear Jesus but who in their insistence to claim their place are blocking others who would come to him. One of the reasons organized religion is dying in this country is because of people blocking
the way. It seems normal to them. Some are not interested in stepping away from position of power.

Some time ago I suggested that we make a liturgical change in the language used in the ritual across the way. Rather than saying, after a reading from Scripture, “The Word of the Lord.” And the people respond with “Thanks be to God.” That we change it to something like “A story from our tradition.” You would have thought that I . . .

I think also about the people who brought the paralytic to Jesus. They didn’t let anything get in the way. They simply removed the roof. They got a new perspective on Jesus and what he was teaching. They came at this Jesus thing in a whole new way.

Again, this is a parable and, as such, is so much more powerful than a news report.

If I were Jesus or the owner of the house, I would be so upset that somebody messed up my house. I just had that new roof put on. But, there is none of that. Instead, Jesus is impressed.

Now, if you have ever messed with Jesus’ house or attempted to do so, get ready for upset because a lot of people are not going to like it. The people in the house immediately go into control and judgment mode. “Who the heck does this fellow think he is?” Notice, they aren’t critical of, they don’t judge the paraplegic. They aren’t critical of, they don’t judge the people
who brought the man to Jesus. They judge and are critical of Jesus. They do this in the silence of their hearts.

“Why do you raise such questions in your hearts?”

That could be something of a spiritual assignment could it not? To be aware of those judgments and criticisms in our own hearts that block us or others from a place at the table.

In the story, Jesus gives the man what he needs and sends him home.

In the story, it says, “The man did it - got up, grabbed his stretcher, and walked out, with everyone there watching him. They rubbed their eyes, incredulous - and then praised God, saying, ‘We’ve never seen anything like this!’”

That everyone is everyone.

The only people Jesus had difficulty accepting were those who excluded themselves by not accepting those he accepted.

Though this is just a tiny example of what I have in mind, it is the most current and relevant one: I have watched with interest and heartbreak this debacle about the LBGTQ+ issue in the Methodist Church. I want to take some of those who led in this movement that has done so much damage to the church and to
people and shake them until their teeth fall out. But, that just shows how far I’m lagging behind in following Jesus.

Our task is not to change people. That never works. Our opportunity is to change Jesus’ house.

What I’m calling on you and me and us to do is to dig a hole in the roof of Jesus house so that anyone who wants to can get in - regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic status, educational background, religious beliefs, whatever.

Let’s bring the very best critical thinking we can to this task.

Then let’s live what we learn from our hearts.

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