

THE NOCEBO EFFECT – the Power of Expectation. A sermon delivered at Mt. Hope by Rev. Steven Schafer on February 2, 2015. Texts: Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 and I Corinthians 8: 1-13.

I was listening to the radio last week while driving and had one of those "in the garage" experiences. You've probably had them. You're listening to something on your way home and whatever it is being discussed isn't over yet so you find yourself sitting in your car in the garage long enough that your spouse, who heard the garage door open, comes out to see if you're OK.

The segment was on the power of expectation. It seems that a researcher recently purchased a few lab rats from a lab rat company - generic, run-of-the-mill, rats (now, I don't know where you buy rats, but apparently there are places – I wonder how much a rat costs?)... He put two or three in one cage and two or three in another. He then put signs on each cage. On one cage his sign said that these rats are highly intelligent. On the other cage the sign suggested that those rats were on the lower edge of intelligence - that they were sub-par in the brain department.

The next day, when his assistants arrived for work, he asked them to run the rats through a maze and time them. As unbelievable as this may sound, the rats from the cage marked 'highly intelligent' ran the maze FAR quicker than the rats who were labeled stupid. And, apparently, it wasn't by just a few seconds difference. The difference in the rats' performance was extraordinary!

"How can that be?" he wondered. The rats couldn't read the signs. The so-called smart ones couldn't feel superior and thus do better. The rats, themselves, had no ability to meet expectations. He concluded the difference was almost entirely in the lab assistants. They treated the smart rats with greater respect. They petted them more. They encouraged them more. They EXPECTED more of them. The dumb rats were, essentially, taken out of their cages and put into the maze and urged to run through it without much hope of great results. And their expectations were met. I found that fascinating.

But guess what. That was only the first segment of the story. It finished when I was still a couple of miles from home. What kept me sitting in the car was the next segment where the discussion was about a man named Daniel Kish. Daniel has been blind from shortly after birth. He had retinal cancer and had to have his eyeball removed when he was a baby. He has never seen anything in his entire life. But his mother, apparently quite an extraordinary woman, would never allow his blindness to keep him from doing anything any other child could do. She says she was often criticized when her very active boy would try climbing up a bookcase or go outside to play alone. People told her it was dangerous and foolish. She told them that all boys try climbing bookcases and all children should be allowed to play in the back yard by themselves. She wasn't going to coddle him.

Daniel himself, never even knowing what sight was, adapted to his environment. Today you can type in his name on your computer and watch a video of him riding a bicycle, walking on a crowded sidewalk without a blind man's cane - even a newscast showing him locating a beach ball in the middle of a large field in three minutes. Daniel's mother expected him to live a normal life and so he developed something called 'human echolocation.' He learned that, if he sent out little clicks, he could detect an objects shape and size and density and distance from him... Like a bat does. He now makes a living going around the country teaching the technique to others.

It makes me wonder if EXPECTATIONS might just be the most powerful tool we have in our lives...

About a decade ago, researchers made a surprising discovery: Women who believed that they were prone to heart disease were nearly four times as likely to die as women who didn't hold such fatalistic views.

Their risk factors were the same: age, blood pressure, cholesterol, weight. So their higher risk of death had nothing to do with these usual heart disease culprits. Instead, the only difference was their expectation - whether or not

they believed they were at risk for heart disease. Kind of scary: They thought they were going to get sick and die, and so they did.

You've heard of the placebo effect. The doctor gives you a pill for some ailment (some REAL ailment) and you get well - not knowing that the pill has no medicine in it at all. They call this other side of the coin the "nocebo" phenomenon. While the placebo effect refers to health benefits produced by a treatment that should have no effect, patients experiencing the nocebo effect experience the opposite. They presume the worst, health-wise, and that's what they get.

The word placebo is Latin for "I will please," and that's exactly what those little sugar pills do. They please us and make us feel better. But nocebo is Latin for "I will harm," and that's precisely what negative beliefs tend to do. Think sick - be sick - die.

There was a nocebo effect running wild in the church at Corinth back in the first century A.D. Here is what was going on. Back in that day, animal sacrifice was a thing practiced by just about every religion. Somehow the gods were pleased when animals were slaughtered. (I'm not saying that too critically because our God was one of them - animal sacrifice was part and parcel of the rite of purification - the killing of the innocent lamb was essential for the forgiveness of sin). So, on any given day in Corinth (and in many cities of that day) there was lamb and goat and dove meat to be had. What do you do with slaughtered animals? The first portion went to feed the priests, but there were always too many animals sacrificed for the priests and their families to consume. So the meat was sold in the marketplace to the general public.

If you go to a Corinthian Burger King, your BK Broiler might include leftovers from a sacrifice to Zeus or Aphrodite or Hermes. This was common practice, and no one had a problem with it - no one except some of the early converts to Christianity. These followers of Jesus have, of course, turned their backs on the Greek gods, and they feel guilty about eating meat that has been sacrificed to gods who are idols. They want to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, and they sense that eating this tainted, "sacrificial" meat will make them spiritually unclean - that it would, in some way, be endorsing the existence of those other gods. They believed that their God would be offended and would strike them down.

It was the classic nocebo effect. They expected that they would be sinning if they ate this meat and that there may be dire consequences.

In steps the apostle Paul, with what he hopes will be a cure. He reminds the Corinthians that no idol in the world actually represents a god because no other God actually exists. There is no God but the one - God the Father of us all and the heavenly father of Jesus. Sure, there may be many "so-called gods" in heaven or on earth, but for Christians there is only one God the Father and one Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator and Preserver of all things (1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

So is there any problem with eating meat offered to idols? No, not really. Idols don't exist, so sacrifices to Greek gods are sacrifices to nothing. Meat can't be tainted by something that is nothing.

But wait a second. The nocebo effect reminds us that people can get sick based on beliefs, not just facts. It's not enough for a doctor to say, "You're perfectly healthy." And it's not enough for Paul to say, "Idol meat is perfectly fine." People have to believe it for it to have an effect.

Paul knows that not everyone is going to believe what he says about idol meat. So he recommends that the

Christians in Corinth put more emphasis on love than on knowledge. "Knowledge puffs up," he reminds them, "but love builds up" (v. 1). So make your decisions based on what is most loving, he recommends, not on what is most consistent with higher knowledge.

Love is the key, according to Paul - regardless of where you stand on idol meat, or anything else.

There are numerous nocebo effects crippling our Christian health today. We make ourselves sick when we disagree over issues that may someday seem as antiquated as the Corinthian disagreement over meat sacrificed to idols.

Many Christian scholars are now battling over whether or not God's knowledge of the future is limited. A Lutheran pastor has been under fire for praying at an interfaith event following a terrorist attack. Catholics are debating whether priests should be allowed to marry, and whether women should be ordained. Gender-inclusive language in Today's New International Version Bible is creating a tug of war between camps in the evangelical world, just as similar changes in the New Revised Standard Version created conflicts among mainline Christians a couple of decades ago. Believers of all denominations wrestle every day with the issue of gays and lesbians in the life of the church, and whether celibacy and marriage are the only options for faithful sexual activity. Religious school vouchers, doorbell evangelism and capital punishment reform have all made their way to the Supreme Court, and all have been topics of religious controversy in recent years.

It's literally enough to make you sick. Not that these issues aren't important, each in its own way, but the cumulative effect of all this dueling and debating is downright sickening. What we have now is a church that has been fighting for so long that it is "worried sick" and "scared to death." And these are not simply figures of speech - they are becoming observable scientific phenomena. The church is dying because we believe we are sick... The nocebo effect.

So, what's the cure?

Paul's advice is to avoid rating knowledge or certainty or "being right" too highly. The operative principle for the church is love, shown through an attitude of respect for Christians of diverse beliefs. "Not everyone has the same knowledge," he says, and this is as true for the issue of idol meat as it is for the issues that vex us today.

"Christians don't share all of the same knowledge," observes Paul. Get used to it. Get over it.

The important thing is to behave in such a way that you do not become a stumbling block to your fellow Christians. For Paul, this meant that HE would abstain from eating 'sacrificial' meat, even though he believed that there was nothing really wrong with it. He took seriously the fact that some of his fellow Christians believed that idol meat was unclean, and that their faith would be hurt - even destroyed! - by eating such meat. ...So Paul put their needs ahead of his own, and promised "I will never eat meat offered to an idol, so that I may not cause one of them to fall" (v. 13). He gave up that juicy steak because he loved others.

What a concept: to put the needs of our Christian opponents ahead of our own. To invest our energy in building up their faith, instead of knocking down their points of view. To love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and to follow the words of Jesus when he said "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

In the church today, we are sometimes so concerned about being right that we have forgotten about being loving. But as Paul points out in today's passage about idol meat, our primary Christian responsibility is not to be correct, but to be compassionate. Our job is to care for, nurture and build up one another in love, and to recognize that

everyone is a precious child of God, a brother or sister “for whom Christ died” (v. 11). If we fail to see each other in this light - even those with whom we have profound disagreement - then we sin against members of our family, and, according to Paul, we “sin against Christ” (v. 12).

When we fail to behave as Christians, showing love and mercy and grace and understanding, we fail to function as a healthy church. Our sick actions invariably result in our becoming weak and sickly ourselves.... But when we act in ways that are loving, we discover a health and vitality that we’ve never known before. A church that loves God and neighbor is a community of faith that is growing larger, getting deeper, reaching out and transforming human lives. When we behave this way, we become a truly strong and healthy part of the body of Christ in the world today.

Sometime in this new year you will welcome a new minister to First Congregational. EXPECT him/her to have a fruitful ministry. EXPECT him/her to be a man/woman of God. EXPECT him/her to love you...to be creative...to inspire you...to be a Christ-like presence. Great expectations bring great, positive, powerful results...

When you come on a Sunday morning, EXPECT to be met by the Holy one – EXPECT to encounter loving people – EXPECT to leave with joy and hope and peace within. EXPECT others to catch a glimpse of God and have their lives transformed. EXPECT to be loved... EXPECT that you will love God more today than you did yesterday... And EXPECT to be overwhelmed with the good that comes from all of that – it will - ...and then praise God.