

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

May 9, 2010

John 5:1-9

"Get Up"

Jesus was in Jerusalem and he goes by the Pool of Bethesda (Bethzatha). This pool, fed by an underground spring, is down off the street, and is surrounded by porticoes offering some shade and shelter. Legend said that on occasion an angel would trouble the waters of the pool and the first person into the water would be healed; so the pool and surrounding area had become a gathering place for anyone with some sort of illness, but especially the blind, the lame and paralyzed. All gathered watching the surface of the water for the smallest sign of the rippling of the waves. One can imagine how a small bubbling from the underground spring or even a slight breeze could cause a stampede of invalids trying to be the first in the water.

In one of these porticoes Jesus strikes up a conversation with a man who has been ill for 38 years, lying there beside the pool, but he can't get to the water, certainly not first, not on his own. So for all those years he lay there on his mat all day long. It had become a way of life for him, living with healing just out of reach. Jesus asks this man, "Do you want to be healed (made whole)?" Of course he wants to be made well; otherwise he wouldn't be dragging himself there to the pool every day - but what can he do? "Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." We hear some defensiveness there. Maybe he's used to being blamed for his own illness. Maybe he heard in Jesus' question the suggestion that he should try harder, think positively, be proactive. The man wants to point out to Jesus that no, that's not it, it's the scarcity of resources available (no one to help him), circumstances that prevent his healing (everyone else gets there ahead of him).

This is one of those conversations with Jesus in John's gospel where its not about what it seems to be about. Like Nicodemus, who couldn't understand how a grown man could enter his mother's womb and be born again, or like Mary and Martha whose brother Lazarus had died, and if Jesus would only have been there sooner maybe he could have done something to prevent it —

when it wasn't about Lazarus dying but about God bringing to life — the man in this story thinks they are talking about the pool, about how many people are elbowing each other toward the water and about how hopeless the case is. But Jesus isn't talking about the circumstances of the man's long days at the edge of the pool - but about taking up his mat and walking. This is what Jesus tells him, and the man does as he is told: he takes up his mat, and begins walking.

It's important to note that there are a couple of things that are not present in this story. First, there is no request for healing. The only question comes from Jesus - "Do you want to be healed?" The man doesn't reach out to Jesus for help. He doesn't seem to know anything about Jesus except that he asks personal questions of strangers. The writer of Ephesians praises God "who is able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine." This is the God whom Jesus reveals here. The man didn't ask for healing, and couldn't have imagined the events that would unfold.

The second thing that it's important to see isn't here is that there is no mention of faith. What the man believes or where he places his trust doesn't even come up. It does in other stories of healing in the gospels, but not here. All we hear from this man is that although he has learned not to expect the system to meet his needs, he keeps coming back to the pool - maybe a slim chance is better than none. Later in the story the man is asked by the religious authorities (who chastise him for carrying his mat around on the Sabbath!) who it was who healed him, he can't. They demand that he point him out to them, but by that time Jesus had melted into the crowd.

And so, alongside a pool known for its healing waters, with its long line of cutthroat invalids -we have a healing with no pool, no lines, no waiting. After 38 years of being ill, this man's waiting is over. The time of healing is now - no waiting for the water to be stirred, for a turn in line, or even for the sun to go down on the Sabbath so that the healing of a chronic condition is not controversial. Jesus speaks to the man, and the man picks up his mat and walks. There is more to the story, but most of it can be summarized with Jesus' explanation of his actions: "My Father is still working, and I also am working." As long as God is working, so am I.

I know that the Sunday morning Bible study group has been plumbing the depths of this story for several weeks now, and there is so much there to *mine*, as it is full of precious spiritual resources. What particularly strikes me about this story is how Jesus, though he obviously cared about the man, he didn't seem to care about what had prevented the man from getting to the pool for healing. That's not where his healing, his wholeness, was to be found anyway. But what keeps us stuck to our mats is that we do care about the circumstances that keep us from wholeness in Christ. We care about them a lot.

The man had a chronic condition, and for better or for worse he had learned to live with it for 38 years. No matter what the condition of our physical or mental health or well-being, we all have a chronic condition. It manifests itself in all kinds of ways. There are more symptoms than we can possibly name, but the primary condition that scripture names is sin. If we claim that it isn't, Paul writes, "we deceive ourselves and are strangers to the truth." "All have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God."

This is basic to our Christian confession and Christian understanding, so basic, in fact, that it hardly bears mentioning, and so it hardly is. It's a chronic condition, so we figure out ways to live with it. Some of those ways are ritualistic, through prayers of confession, for example – in the long Jewish and Christian traditions there are many rituals and seasons of sacrifice and penance that acknowledge our sinfulness – and these are important because “our sin is ever before us.”

But do we want to be healed, made whole – that is, do we want to live as survivors of this chronic condition or do we want to remain victims of it? We can't fool ourselves; we're not going to escape the condition, but that's not the point. We don't need to worry about that, for the power of sin and its cousin, death, has already been broken in the cross of Christ. Just as Jesus didn't care about the circumstances that kept the man from healing, so he doesn't care about the conditions and circumstances that we might get stuck on, hold on to, that keep us from fullness of life, abundant life, in him. He cares about us. He cares about our healing and our wholeness, because that is how God's glory is revealed.

You've got to think that some of the man's defensiveness in his response to Jesus there by the side of the pool was due to how accustomed he had become to living in this way, just out of reach of healing. It might be that he had a pretty good view of all the proceedings – a good vantage point from which to nurse his own victimization. Waiting there for others to come to him, even for God to come to him, lying there on his mat with all his stuff around him.

When I said that we do care about the circumstances that keep us from wholeness in Christ, even when he doesn't, this is how I meant it. Sometimes we fear the cure more than the illness. Bill Coffin said that if it is hell to be guilty, it's certainly scarier to be responsible – response-able — able to respond to God's call, able to respond to the word and the love of Jesus.

When we cease to be a victim – “I can't get to the water, Jesus . . .” “I've been so hurt by this person . . . I've been disappointed . . . I gave all that time and it was never acknowledged . . . I'm dealing with a lot at work right now . . . My family just takes so much of my time . . .” – when we cease to be a victim, and start being responsible, then we find our legs are strong enough for us to walk beside others who are in pain and need help. We find that our arms have the strength to embrace the outcasts. Our mouths find the words to tell our own stories of healing and hope in Jesus Christ.

There are a lot of mats, and we can grow quite used to remaining on them. We say we want to change, *to get up* and walk in the fullness of life, but what we often really want is to remain the same and just feel better about it. Believe me, I know. I know how pride and self-deception can keep you planted on that mat. I know how the church can be held back in its witness and mission to the world by focusing on the resources it doesn't have, getting lost amidst all the circumstances that try to explain why so many churches these days find themselves on the mat.

Jesus wants us to participate in our own salvation. It doesn't matter how long we've been on the mat, or even why we're there. We're dealing with God's time here, and we're dealing with a God who "remembers our sin no more."

Let us not focus on what hinders our commitment to Christ or what gets in the way of our prayer and good works, our healing and our wholeness.

Where our love of God is stifled by guilt or resentment – get up!

Where our love of neighbor is held in check by our fears – get up!

Where our hearts are closed to the new thing God wants for us – get up!

Where our hands are closed so that we can't serve others or be served by others – get up!

Where our minds are closed so that we hold more dearly to our own opinions and judgments than to God's truth revealed – get up!

Let us take up our mats and walk.