

John 5:1-9

### **The Healing at the Pool on the Sabbath**

**5** After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup>Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. <sup>3</sup>In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. <sup>5</sup>One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” <sup>7</sup>The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.” <sup>8</sup>Jesus said to him, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” <sup>9</sup>And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath.

## Carried to the Pool

A Sermon Preached at North Prospect Union Church, Medford, MA

Date: May 13, 2007

Scripture: *John 5:1-9*

Sometimes the distance between our world and the world of the Bible seems as large as a chasm. Should you do good works on the Sabbath? In the first century this was a burning question. Today we would say that every day is a day to do good works, and maybe Sunday is the most obvious day of all to do them. When Abraham takes Isaac up the mountain, we are startled by the idea that Abraham would kill his son at God's command. Few of us can imagine a society in which child sacrifice is commonplace. We struggle to make sense of the miracles of Jesus, but in the ancient world miracle workers could be found performing on almost every street corner. Miracles were an accepted reality. Sometimes the world of the Bible seems a long distance from today's world.

But there are other times when the Bible seems as contemporary as today. Today's story from John seems very up-to-date to me. Here in the major city of Jerusalem, near one of the city gates lay a collection of poor and the disabled people hoping for help. The scene is not unlike Harvard Square or Boston Common today. In Jerusalem, day after day the weary, broken and ill were found with their thin roll-up mats and few belongings, gathered under the five large enclosures surrounding the five-sided pool. The large porticoes or colonnades were roofed, which protected the throngs from the sun and the elements, which provided some small comfort to those who were forced to call the place home. The setting is eerily familiar. Many people in need still populate the city streets with a roll of belongings and minimal protection from the elements.

Perhaps a little less familiar, though, is one of the reasons that the poor and the disabled gathered near the Sheep's gate in Jerusalem. While it was surely a place for the homeless to find some shelter, beg for food and form a community of people who understood one another's circumstances, the five-sided pool that was there was thought to have healing powers.

There is a verse that is omitted from the most reliable ancient manuscripts that says that an angel of the Lord went down and stirred the waters of the pool at certain times. While that verse wasn't likely in the original, it is clear from later in the passage that at certain times the water in the pool bubbled or stirred. Modern commentators have thought that the periodic movement of the water might have been caused by bubbling springs. Or maybe it was something like Old Faithful. Nobody knows, and it doesn't really matter. What matters is that from time to time the water would spontaneously go into motion, and the sick and disabled would rush to the water. For it was when the water was stirring that the people believed that they would be healed, if they jumped in. And who's to say. Even today there are pools and springs that are thought to have such healing powers.

The most striking thing to me about this story, though, isn't the spontaneous rush of the waters, or even their healing properties. The most striking thing in this story to me is that there is one man, who cannot move at all on his own, who has been at this pool-side for thirty-eight

years. Think of the life expectancy in the first century. The man had been there a lifetime. He had been there a lifetime, and every time the water roiled, the others would push him aside, step over him and rush to get into the pool. Greed and self-serving seem to know no social boundaries. Even these people who came to the colonnade because they themselves needed healing paid this poor man no mind. No one seemed to care for this man who had been hoping for healing for a lifetime. That's pretty rough.

But something bothers me about this story. It sounds a little off to me. Does it to you? I mean, I can't believe that in thirty-eight years no one had ever tried to help the man. I can't quite believe that they ignored him, or trampled him every day for thirty-eight years. If I were a betting man, I would bet that there had been, at some time or other, people who tried to help the man, but it didn't work. He didn't get better. Maybe they got him to the water. Maybe they got him there many times. But it just didn't seem to work for him. Or maybe he was cranky and grumpy. People tried to help, but they got sick of his attitude. Finally no one liked him very much. Or maybe he smelled bad. Whatever the reason, whether the people were worn out trying to help the man and just sick and tired of the uselessness of it, or whether they found him repelling for one reason or another, I believe that people had at some point tried to help the man, but they had finally given up.

I think that, because I believe that we humans do care for one another. We do try to help each other. But I also believe that we lose patience pretty quickly with those whose conditions are chronic, or who never seem to improve no matter how much we help. Some people call the problem compassion fatigue. We run out of energy and compassion for the chronically ill, the disabled, the persistently homeless, the perpetual alcoholic, especially if they aren't happily resigned to their fate. We don't mean to give up on them, but after awhile many of us just can't seem to help ourselves. We become a lot like Job's friends who sat with him for a week, but after that they wanted him either to get better or to accept his situation. I think our story this morning gives us a lot of insight into the human condition.

Now, we've had a nice communion service a couple of hours ago, we've had a nice breakfast, all celebrating Mother's Day. You may be thinking, You would have thought the senior minister would have preached something appropriate for the day, something for Mother'd Day.

Well, here's the connection. When I think of this poor man at the side of the pool in Jerusalem, I think how sad it is that people treat him the way they do, and also that he doesn't seem to have any family to help him. We don't know if his parents were ever in the picture. We don't know if he had brothers and sisters, or aunts and uncles. But what we do know one thing, and this is another thing that has remained the same through the ages. We know that very often families, and maybe even especially mothers will remain devoted to their ill and disabled family members long after the rest in society have thrown their hands in the air. The story cries out for a committed and loving family member to help.

In a sense, then, the story helps me be grateful for the ways that I myself have experienced the help of my mother and my family in my life. Even today, I am pretty sure that if I were in that man's shoes, I would not be left alone at the side of the pool to be trampled by others on their way to the healing waters. There are family members in my life, who would care. And there were others, like my mother who has gone to her rest, who in other days have cared for me when I was hurt and in trouble.

We don't know anything about the family of the man in the story. Maybe he had no family. Or maybe his family just wasn't up to the task. This is another side of the story. Many of us, even those whose families have mostly been there, have at one time or another been let down by our family. Some, sad to say, have been let down mightily. David Letterman quipped that Mother's Day is that day that reminds us why we are in therapy. That's more than a little cynical, but it is true that Mother's Day can be a double-edged day, because where some celebrate the care they got, others remember a mixed bag, and others never had their mothers or family to care for them, for whatever reason.

And then there is another simple if sad truth. No matter how good our families are, no matter how nostalgic we may become on days like this one, our families are not enough. Even the best of them are flawed and human. Even the best of them grow old and leave us. Even if we have the best of families, we will find ourselves facing some of worst days without the benefit of them. So, where is all these rather disheartening thoughts? What's the answer?

There's the story about the children's sermon in which the minister says, "I'm thinking of an animal. It's about this long. It's grey, and it has a big bushy tail. Can anyone tell me what it is?" One little guy sticks his hand in the air and blurts out, "It sure sounds like a squirrel to me, but I know the answer is Jesus." Well, so here we go, when we are alone and being walked over, and nothing in this world is enough, the answer, indeed, is Jesus.

When Jesus met the man at the pool he addressed him. He talked to him. He didn't walk by him, or over him. He didn't pretend not to notice him. Jesus went right up to the man that no one else was paying any attention to. He asked the man if he wanted to be healed. And then he told the man to get up and walk. Suddenly the man was well. Now, I think it's fair to say that simply turning to Jesus won't necessarily take away disabilities or illness. It's a cruel message to give to those who are disabled and ill that if they but would turn to Jesus in faith, they would be fine. But I think it is also fair to say that Jesus' love can without question heal the wounds of loneliness and the hurt and isolation that many people encounter in life. And in some cases that wonderful healing of the spirit may help the body to heal, as well. In the Gospels we certainly see the healing hand of Jesus at work. Many of us have experienced the love and healing of the risen Christ. So, when our families and our friends let us down, many of us have found solace and healing in turning to Jesus.

But there is one more, equally important thing to say. In the Gospels it is also the case that Jesus spends at least as much time telling his disciples and others who listened to him that they, along with him, were to be instruments of hope and healing in the world. As much as Jesus healed, even more he taught and enjoined those who followed him to become loving and caring neighbors. Jesus worked hard to help people realize that they were the instruments of God in the world. Indeed, one way of thinking about Jesus' ministry is that he healed the broken bodies and spirits in part so that those he healed would themselves take up that same work.

And that brings us back full circle. For while it is true that our societies and even our families are human and flawed, and that they disappoint us. Or maybe it's better to talk about ourselves. As parents and friends and neighbors, we are human and flawed, and we often disappoint one another and ourselves. It is the case, though, that Jesus, the risen Christ, the word of the gospel, the presence of God, the Holy Spirit can begin to mend in us our broken places, renew our spirits, make us new, make us completely new. And in that newness of life, in that newness of being, old habits can break, old patterns can shatter, old weaknesses can be

overcome, and we can be strengthened and made more whole, so that we can be better family members, better friends and better neighbors.

At one point in his ministry Jesus tells his disciples that what is impossible with human beings is possible with God. I take it that Jesus means not only that there are things that God can do that we can't, but also that with God's help we can do things that otherwise are impossible for us. Perhaps there are no more important things in this category than the ways we care for one another. With God's help, we can become better, more patient, more helpful family members and neighbors.

The man who has been at the pool for thirty-eight years needs the healing touch of Jesus. And so do those who have abandoned him or ignore him or run over him. The good news, of course, is that it's there for the asking. Thanks be to God. Amen.