Jonah 4:6-8, John 5:1-9

“Healing on our own terms”

This is always an exciting Sunday in the life of the church. Whenever we receive new members it is a celebration and a joyous occasion, almost like a new birth in the family, in our family. What I love about this new members class, which is true of any of the classes, is that they have a personality. It won’t be long before you get to know Keri, Shelley, Dave and Michelle.

But each of them has also been on a tremendous faith journey that finds them before you today. That faith journey which culminates in a recognition of Jesus as Savior of the world is what we have in common. But like the rest of us, they have had occurrences that we wish we wouldn’t have had. All of us have those events and moments when we feel as if God’s timing was just a little off and it gives us personality at the best, regret and being jaded at the worst.

Jonah is such a person, as is the protagonist in our reading of John. They both experience God’s presence in their lives but they react in a very different way than these new members did when they embraced the possibilities before them. These people in Scripture approach the presence of God with quite a bit of reluctance and even demand certain things from God, which eventually reminds us that anytime we are witnessing the presence and power of God it will all take place in God’s timing. Any healing, any resolution to a problem, any wholeness that needs to be seen is going to take place on God’s terms and in God’s timing and will not be dictated by us or our culture. We forget that, let’s be reminded of that today.

**READ**

We find ourselves in chapter 5 of John which isn’t bad since we began way back in April. 5 chapters in 5 months. But before we get ahead of ourselves, let’s look at the Old Testament reading first. You know the story of Jonah, don’t you? Here is a prophet of God, a preacher, and he is told to go to the arch enemy of Israel, his home country. With the Olympics on now we get an extra dose of patriotism, don’t we, and the enmities seem to come back pretty strong. Did you hear about the North Korean soccer team that walked off the field because under each of their pictures the organizers had made a mistake and put the South Korean flag. That’s a big deal.

The second week that I was here I preached on Jonah and spoke more in depth about his hatred for the Ninevites, it would be as if God asked you to go to an Al-Qaida training camp and preach the Gospel and witness them enter the kingdom of God knowing that God would have mercy on them.

A little different when you make it personal, isn’t it? We pick the story up in our Scripture after he refuses to go and so runs away, after he is swallowed by a whale, after he is spit up by same whale on the shores of Nineveh, after he reluctantly preaches repentance to the Ninevites, after the king and all the people and all the animals repent, after Jonah says he wishes he could die because God was merciful to the Ninevites. You see where we are now?

We find Jonah as the prophet who is called to bring people to God but doesn’t want to because he doesn’t like the people and it isn’t being done in the way or the manner that he wants nor is it being done on his terms. He is a bit the antithesis of Jeremiah from last week. Was Jeremiah a sower or a reaper? Did people repent and come to know God as a result of his message? No, but he kept going. Jonah, on the other hand was not a reluctant sower, but rather a reluctant reaper. We said last week that reaping is much more sexy, okay, maybe we didn’t say that, but we should have. There is more energy and excitement in reaping because growth strokes the ego. The people of Ninneveh were saved, changed their lives because of the message of Jonah, but he was miserable because he didn’t want God to save them.

In fact Jonah is so miserable that God forgave them, he feels so strongly about how things should and should not be that 3 times in this chapter he says he wishes he could die because God is so unfair. Keep in mind God did not say that because the Ninnevites are saved that means that someone else has to go off the cliff. He didn’t say, well, they are saved so now Jonah you miss out, rather the Ninnevites were washed clean of their sin and included with those whom God chose to save.

What we read in these Scriptures is God proving to Jonah who is in charge. Follow along in the Scriptures that we read again if you would. God made a bean plant come up, God made it come up above Jonah’s head, God’s purpose in that would be to provide shade for Jonah, God wanted Jonah to be comfortable. That is clearly God’s initiative up to this point. The rest, is also God’s initiative. God commanded a worm to come, and a withering wind, he also chose to take that plant away to teach Jonah the lesson that he is in control of all things. If he is in control of the plants then wouldn’t it make sense that he is also in control of all the people, good, bad, or indifferent?

Jonah, you are not the one who chooses how I act, no matter how strong you feel about something. You see, it has to be on God’s terms because only God is able to have the complete big picture in mind. God always has all of our life in mind. All of it, not just a few events.

In John we make our way to the pools of Bethesda. You know that term in Hebrew: Beth means home or house, like Bethany means house of dried figs, who would ever name their kid that? Bethesday comes from Beth, yeda which means grace so it is house of grace. Did you know that President Roosevelt when driving with his aide decided to place the National Institute of Health back in the 30’s in Bethesda, Maryland because he knew of this healing and thought it would be very appropriate.

It is in this scene that takes part in the northeast part of Jerusalem in the entrance where the shepherds would bring their sheep because it was close to the temple area where the sheep would be sacrificed, that Jesus and his disciples entered. I would think that they chose this entrance because for the most part they could stay under the radar. I love the part that our good shepherd entered by the sheep gate. I’ve been to this place in Jerusalem and I’ve seen the pool where Jesus identified the man who was there for 38 years.

It is a pool the size of a football field, absolutely huge. It just bakes in the sun, but if you can stand under the colonnades then there is a lot of shade. You can easily get the picture of this being the place where all those who were on the extreme periphery of life would be. Those who were crippled, paralyzed, those who survived on the generosity of those who passed by.

Jesus enters the area and it is absolutely crowded with the outcasts of the society but for some reason his eye rests upon that one man. Like the woman at the well he knows everything about this guy, everything. He knows he’s been there for an eternity, 38 years. He knows that he hasn’t had much of a life and any opportunities that he thought he may have had in the past have vanished with his age. The fact that the Scripture tells us that it is 38 years is significant. How long did Israel wander in the wilderness? You want to say 40 years don’t you? Look at Deuteronomy 2:14 and tell me what it says…how many years? Maybe it is symbolic of the fact that this man was about to come out of the wilderness and into the promised land, maybe. We just know that he was sick for a long time, but now he has his future ahead of him and he doesn’t quite realize it yet.

Jesus approaches him and asks him a question. Do you want to be made well? Not, do you want to get better, but do you want to be made well? Someone else is going to do it for you, they will step in and make you better. Do you want that? Now, if I were the man I might say something like: well, duh!, of course. But I wasn’t there, and instead we see that as a response he comes up with an excuse as to why he can’t be made better because he can’t make his way into the water. It is almost as if he felt that Jesus were accusing him of something.

As an aside, all of the oldest manuscripts that we have of this Scripture do not contain verse 4, but people like it because it is in some of the older English translations while not being in any of the oldest original language translations. It talks about an angel stirring the water. I’m not going to address that, but suffice it to say that it was believed that once the waters were stirred then the first one there would be healed. It was a true survival of the fittest.

I want to make it to the water but these young whippersnappers get there before I can once the water is stirred, so now I’ve basically stopped trying. It is the truth and probably has been for a while, say maybe the last 20 years after 18 years of trying to get in first and not making it. But his answer also betrays a chronic inability to seize opportunity. This is what is so dangerous about thinking we can control God’s timing and how God works. It doesn’t take long to see that we can’t and then we stop trying to seize any opportunity that may come our way.

It takes something to recognize an opportunity provided by God. These new members have done that and now they are fired up by God to do something exciting and new in this church. They want to seize the opportunity that has been given them. Do we still come to this church every week or even every day looking for those opportunities that God is providing on his terms? Or do we try to squeeze him into our world view and our limited understanding of how things work?

You see, this guy by the pool sees no opportunities and hasn’t seen them in years, years, and you can’t blame him, because society told him there was only one way to be healed and get better and he didn’t have a chance at that. Get to the water first, yeah right. But Jesus acts on his own terms and provides opportunities where in the past there were none.

Hersheiser is a soon to be Hall of Famer pitcher who had a stellar career for the Dodgers. In 1989 he suffered an injury that many thought would be career ending. He agreed to the surgery that no pitcher had yet undergone and come out able to pitch again. A group of people from the First Presbyterian Church of Orlando where he is a member gathered together with and prayed for him before, during, and after the surgery. He came through it and it was only a matter of time to see how well he fared. It was supposed to take 2 years before he could even throw a ball again and then they would have to see if he was up to the big league potential as before. This team from First Pres. Orlando continued to pray for him. He made amazing progress and after 15 months the doctors said he could pitch again and he went back to pitching in the major leagues. Now I could stop the story there and it would still be an amazing miracle that he was able to make it back.

At this point in the story he took a baseball out of his pocket. You see his first game back he had given his row of box seats to those people from the church who had prayed for him to make it back to baseball. The very first pitch that he threw was strike and it was filed off, it was fouled off to the box seats where those people who had prayed for him were sitting. And the leader of that group caught the very first ball that Oral Hersheiser pitched after nearly two years of praying for his arm to be able to be healed completely. Hersheriser showed us the ball with tears in his eyes and said isn’t it amazing to know that God is still in control?

Jesus acts on his own terms and provides opportunities wherein the past there were none, and then he proves it. That question of do you want to be made well is not as easy as it sounds. Do you want God to take control of your life? Things will never be the same if you say yes. You know, this guy is healed without showing any faith, without any sign of trust in Jesus. Jesus just tells him to get up, take his mat, and walk.

Do we really want to be made well? That’s a tough question because sometimes being made well involves getting out of the shade, stepping away from those friends who have kept you down for 38 years, it could mean learning to walk again, but in a different way and now doing things differently than in the past.

I would love to challenge all of us to identify that in our life which has kept us paralyzed by the pool unable to walk on our own. Maybe familiarity. Whatever it is, look for opportunities outside of the familiar and I believe we will find God encouraging us to walk again. Amen.