

Sermon Text for June 2, 2019 – First Presbyterian Church of Strasburg

John 5:1-15

“What do you want?”

by Holly Miller

Today’s narrative takes place well into the ministry of the man named Jesus. Jesus has been traveling and performing signs in Galilee, Jerusalem, and Judea. In John’s Gospel he has changed water into wine; met secretly in the middle of the night with a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews named Nicodemus, who said, “We know that you are a teacher who has come from God;” and in the noonday heat at a well he asked for a drink of water from a woman who was looking for the Messiah. After Jesus identifies himself, “I am he,” the woman runs to share the good news with her people, the Samaritans, who identify Jesus as “the savior of the world.” Then, back in Galilee, he heals the son of a Roman official, who became a believer, along with his whole household.

Sometime, after all of this, we don’t know how long, we pick up the narrative in Chapter 5 of John. Guess what? Jesus is back in Jerusalem. Let’s read together the Word of God in the Book of John, Chapter 5, verses 1 through 9... We have learned that Jesus has returned to Jerusalem for a festival of the Jews and is walking beside a pool at the Sheep Gate. Now this pool is not just any pool. It is surrounded by people who are suffering physically – blind, lame, paralyzed – and waiting to be healed. Why? It is believed that the waters of this pool have a supernatural power to heal. In fact, you may have noticed there is no verse 4 in John 5:1-9. That is because it has been recognized that verse 4 is not found in the earliest, most reliable manuscripts and was likely added as an explanation for the lame man’s answer to Jesus in verse 7. It says, following the word “paralyzed” in verse 3, **³In these lay many invalids – blind, lame and paralyzed – waiting for the stirring of the water; ⁴for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.**

So these people are all waiting to be healed in the waters of the pool. Meanwhile, Jesus, the Creator, the Word of God, is walking unrecognized through this mass of suffering people. Jesus, who possesses the true power to heal, stops right in front of a certain man. Why does Jesus choose *this* man? We aren’t told. This particular man, chosen by Jesus, is unnamed in the Gospel and doesn’t even seem to know who Jesus is! Nevertheless, Jesus has found and chosen him and stops right there in front of a lame man who has been lying on the ground on a mat for thirty-eight years. That length of time would indicate that his illness, whatever the cause, is a permanent illness. Anyone who has spent time in a hospital bed can tell you it doesn’t take long for muscle tissue to weaken and break down. It takes exercise, time and therapy to regain the muscle mass needed to support your body weight once again. In this case, after 38 years, there was no hope of a cure.

At this point of the miracle story, the setting has been delineated and the characters introduced. Let's look at verse 6 where the healing will begin. Here we read, ***“When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him,...”*** But wait. Before we get to Jesus' question, let's go back to look at one word in the first part of this verse – the word translated “knew” in the NRSV: “When Jesus saw him lying there and *knew* that he had been there a long time...” If you have a different translation, you may find the word γινῶς in the Greek translated as “learned.” In the NIV, for example: “When Jesus saw him lying there and *learned* that he had been in this condition for a long time...” That seems to imply that Jesus asked someone about the man. This is the same Jesus who, in the first chapter of John, saw Nathaniel under a fig tree when Jesus was nowhere near Nathaniel, the same Jesus who knew that the Samaritan woman had had five husbands. I'm thinking this Jesus knew that this lame man had been lying by the pool for 38 years and didn't need to ask someone else for the information.

Back to Jesus' question: ***“he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’”*** Edward Klink¹ argues for the translation, “Do you want to *become* well?” The word γενέσθαι translated *made* or *become* is used by John, especially in the prologue of his Gospel, to represent the creative work of God in the world, which seems to bring a grander, wider sense to this story of healing. It's sort of an odd question, isn't it? Of course, the man wants to get well. That's why he's there, right? By the pool with the healing waters? We might think his answer would be, “Oh, yes!” or “Yes, of course, that's why I'm here.” But his answer, too, is rather curious: ***“Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”***

I wonder if the lame man thinks Jesus is accusing him of not trying hard enough or not really wanting to get well and making excuses. Or, does he think Jesus might be the one to help him to get into the water first? If so, he is totally underestimating Jesus' ability and is relying upon what he thinks will make him well. His presuppositions seem to be getting in the way of his vision, for Jesus, the healer, is standing right before him. Either way – whether he thinks Jesus is accusing him, or might be helpful to him – the lame man doesn't really answer Jesus' question, does he? “Do you want to be made well?” What do you want? There is abundant evidence that healing shrines with water were a regular component of pagan religions, so in a sense this is a competition between these healing waters and Jesus. “Do you want to be made well?” Basically, his answer is: “I want/need to get into the water to be made well.” But Jesus, the living water, commands the lame man: ***“Stand up, take your mat and walk.”*** It is simple and clear. “Do you want to be made well? Obey my commands.”

“At once, the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.” He did not need days of recovery; he was made well at once. He was no longer too weak from all those years of lying

down that he couldn't carry his mat. He did not need weeks or months of physical therapy. "At once, the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk." Notice, never again in this story is he called "the lame man;" he is now "the man." Jesus initiated this healing miracle, and unlike many of the other miracles in the gospel accounts that reward the faith of the person who is healed, this lame man has demonstrated no faith. Actually, I'm wrong. He did demonstrate faith, but in the wrong thing – faith in the waters of the pool, not in Jesus.

This miracle story has a victory, but it does not end here; there is something more happening. Eight simple words (actually seven in the Greek) at the end of verse 9 move the narrative from a miracle story to a conflict. "***Now that day was a sabbath***" signals a rising conflict. In the very next verse, the reader hears the Jewish leaders accuse the healed man of violating the Sabbath by carrying his mat, never mind that for thirty-eight years he laid on that mat, unable to carry it, or that he had been given a new identity by the healer – the man was now a mat-carrier!

Earlier we saw that the mat-carrier was focused on the pool's waters, not on Jesus and his healing power. Here we see the same with the Jewish leaders who are focused on the perceived Sabbath violation rather than Jesus's divine power. How often are we focused on the wrong place or thing, thinking it will be the answer to our problems or be just what we need? How often have we missed the miracles of God, the personalized love of Jesus as he pursues us? When Jesus, the living water, finds you, stops right in front of you, and asks: "What do you want? Do you want to be made well?" What will be your /our response? Will we find an excuse? "I don't deserve it; I'm not good enough." Or will we open ourselves up to the transforming power of the Word of God, Jesus Christ? Will we place a limit on that power? I'm willing to go this far and no farther. Remember, we are in a season of miracles in this church; we are praying each day, every day, for specific miracles that will take place. Are we going to place a limit on the transforming power of Jesus Christ? How dare we!

Our God is a God of surprises! If you don't mind, close your eyes for a moment and imagine...how do you picture God?...sitting up in heaven – on a throne surrounded by singing cherubim and seraphim...lots of clouds and smoke? Our God is a God who saves a baby floating down a river in a basket and later appears to the grown man in a burning bush. Our God is a God who is a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, who speaks not in thunder, but in a still, small voice. Our God is a God who hears cries and rescues, who laughs with us, who delights in us, who surprises us; just take one look at God's creation this spring! Lightning bugs – now there's an imagination! That same God steps down to earth wrapped in human skin and lives here among us.

Do we read John 5:1-9 as just another miracle story? Ho-hum; it's not even as full of excitement as some, Jesus walking on water, for example, or bringing Lazarus back to life. Another oddity – does

this man even say thank you to Jesus, or ask Jesus his name before walking off into the sunset? In Acts, you'll remember the lame beggar, lame from birth, carried daily to his own mat in front of the Beautiful Gate, leaps to his feet when he's healed, shouting thanks to God for days. Not so here. This is different. Maybe that's why Jesus searches the mat-carrier out again. This is a two-part story: Jesus is not finished with this mat-carrier. Earlier in the first Scripture reading, some of part two of this story was read. As we read on, we discover that Jesus seeks the cured man out again for a conversation about spiritual healing; in fact, Jesus has a similar conversation with the Pharisees. His message is not for this man alone, but for all. John 5:1-18 is a two-part story in several ways. Today we looked at the first part – Jesus sought this man and healed his body of a permanent physical ailment immediately with three commands. The man was changed, moved from lameness to mat-carrying: he *became* a mat-carrier.

We are celebrating the seventh Sunday of Easter. Deep into this Easter season we are invited to remember that God is still moving, interceding, providing, transforming. John has included a water theme in his Gospel. Indeed, every chapter up to and including this one incorporates water: creation and baptism in the first chapter, water changed into wine in the second; Jesus tells Nicodemus in the third that he must be “born of water and the Spirit;” in the fourth Jesus shares his message that he is the living water with the Samaritan woman at Joseph's well; here in Chapter 5 there is a pool of healing water where we learn that Jesus is greater than the power of any water. Jill Duffield puts it this way: “The river of life flows between heaven and earth...makes a way for healing in and around pools.” Duffield asks, “Have you said with utter honesty or frustration, ‘I can't get where I need to go’ – only to discover God meets you where you are and then sends you on an altogether new way?”² When we come to the end of our own strength, and I think this past week particularly of the veterans and their families who have experienced coming to the end of their own strength, and today, the graduates and Brett and Laura as they all will be using all of their strength on their new journeys, when we come to the end of our own strength, and are made to lie down, it is then that we “may be given a peek into the very womb of God where a rebirth is possible, where a fresh regrouping of all that” our lives have “been suddenly comes into focus”³

Right here, in this place on sabbath mornings when there are baptisms, the river of life will flow around the baptismal waters where saving grace is proclaimed. God meets us where we are: could this be the day when the same place you've always been is invaded by the saving power of Jesus Christ, the river of life overflowing into the streets of your city?⁴ Of your life? Could this be the day Jesus Christ asks you: “What do you want? Do you want to be made well?” How will you answer? Perhaps, perhaps you'll ask Jesus, “What do You want, Lord?”

Prayer: Almighty Giver & Restorer of Life, When we are presented with an opportunity for healing, let us not find an excuse for remaining as we are, but let us trust and obey the one who asks us in love, “Do you want to be healed?” and who commands us to arise and walk in the newness of life. In the name of the one who is our Living Water, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

¹Edward W. Klink III, "John," *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 271.

²Jill Duffield, "I go down, down, down," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 16, 2019.

³Douglas Steere, "The Twenty-Third Psalm and the Dialectic of Renewal," *Gleanings* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1986), 138-139.

⁴Duffield, *Ibid.*