

A Healing at the Poolside

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Text: John 5:1-18

If there is such a thing as a run-of-the-mill miracle, Jesus' healing of a disabled man at the pool of Bethzatha, or Bethesda, would seem to qualify. A man who was either lame or paralyzed—we're not really told which—was lying among similarly afflicted people near a pool in Jerusalem renowned for its healing powers. People believed that at certain times an angel would stir up the water in the pool, and whoever stepped into the water first after it had been stirred up in this way would be healed of his or her affliction. Think of it as a kind of Lourdes, or Warm Springs, where President Roosevelt went for relief for the after-effects of polio. By the end of this story in the Gospel of John, the man is healed. It's kind of what we expect from Jesus.

But when we look at this story more carefully, this isn't such a run-of-the-mill miracle after all. First of all, unlike almost all the other stories about Jesus' healing powers, this one doesn't begin with someone coming to Jesus to appeal for help, either for himself or for a loved one. In this account, the initiative belongs to Jesus. John tells us that Jesus saw the man, and knew that he had been ill for a long time—thirty-eight years to be precise--and that then, without a word being spoken by this poor fellow, Jesus asked him if he wanted to be made well. There is no reaching out to touch the hem of Jesus' robe, no crying out from the roadside, no being lowered through the roof of a house where Jesus was holding forth, no begging by a distraught mother or father. Jesus saw the man, and he acted.

Jesus saw the man, and he asked him a direct question to which the man gave an indirect, even evasive answer. "Do you want to be made well?" Jesus asked. "I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up," the man replied. "Whenever I'm making my way there, someone steps in front of me." He didn't really even say that he wanted to be healed. But clearly, his presence there at the poolside was his unstated answer to Jesus' question. He did want to be healed.

The story has a contemporary resonance at a time when we continue to ponder the state of health care in this country. There is certainly room for disagreement about how health care should be provided, but there should be a bright red line drawn between those who may disagree about what kind of plan will assure health coverage to the maximum number of people at the most reasonable cost, and those who believe that when it comes to access to healing, it's every one for themselves, that no one has an inherent right to medical care. This fellow had been ill for thirty-eight years. Perhaps for thirty-eight years he had been pushed aside by people whose basic attitude was, "What happens to other people is not my concern. As long as I get mine, the system is working for me, and if the system is working for me, the system is working."

"Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk," Jesus told the man, and he stood up and began to walk. In other accounts of Jesus' healing powers, Jesus tells the person who was healed that it was the person's faith that made him or her well. Remember the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' robe? Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your disease." And blind Bartimaeus? Again, Jesus told him that it was his faith that made him well. And how about the Syro-Phoenician woman, the one whose daughter was possessed by a demon, who persuaded Jesus to heal her little girl despite the fact that she was a Gentile? "Great is your faith," Jesus told her, "Your wish is granted." In these accounts, it seems that Jesus' healing power was released by the faith of the person seeking healing.

But in this morning's reading, there is no indication whatsoever that the man who was given his mobility again had any faith at all. He hadn't asked for Jesus to intervene, and then, to make matters worse, he showed no sign of gratitude for having been healed after the miracle. He simply picked up his mat and joined the crowd: no going off rejoicing and sharing the good news, no returning to thank Jesus. It seems that this fellow took this miracle as his due, his entitlement. And then after the religious authorities reminded him that mat-carrying and walking around on the Sabbath were violations of the blue laws, and asked him who had healed him, because healing on the Sabbath was also forbidden, the man had no clue. He didn't even remember who healed him! It was only after he had encountered Jesus again, in the temple, that Jesus was able to remind him who had given him his new life. And then this guy went back and fingered Jesus to the authorities. John tells us that after this incident, those authorities began to persecute Jesus.

In other words, the fellow Jesus healed wasn't exactly your paragon of virtue either before or after his healing. Before his healing he was simply in line for medical care, hoping to get ahead of someone else to submerge himself in the healing waters. If he'd been able, he probably would have happily elbowed aside some less fortunate soul. "If the system works for me, the system works." He had no real faith; he was just an opportunist. And after his healing, as he walked around carrying his mat, he wasn't sufficiently grateful even to remember who had healed him. That ingratitude carried over into his blowing the whistle on Jesus when he knew that the religious police were after him for being compassionate on Sunday. Not to put too fine a point on it, this fellow was a self-centered, ungrateful bum.

But Jesus healed him, healed him for no apparent reason other than that Jesus was Jesus.

Every once in a while, we'll run into someone rather like that ungrateful fellow who lay by the Bethesda pool: someone who we suspect is gaming the system will come to the church for help, with rent or more often for gas money, or money for food, or help with an overdue utility bill. Sometimes Nan, who is almost always the first to speak with visitors, or I have reason to suspect that something isn't quite right, because there will be inconsistencies in what they tell us, or they'll try to ingratiate themselves by assuring us that they want to come to church, and, by the way, when is mass? It suggests that they've been making the rounds of churches in Eagle River and beyond. One of the many virtues of having Caritas in our community is that there is a place that follows people, not to catch them in inconsistencies, but to assure that the collective resources of the churches and generous people are distributed with a measure of fairness, so that we can be of assistance to as many needy people as we are able to help. For the most part, our default setting here is to provide help if we can. It's not our business to judge other people; it's our business to judge ourselves in terms of our faithfulness to the spirit of Christ. In the same way, we are called to love our enemies not because of who they are—we are all God's children—but because of who we are supposed to be, people who are called to be signs of God's kingdom, members of the body of Christ.

You see, Paul really meant it when he referred to the church as the body of Christ, as actually being Christ in the world. Becoming a follower of Jesus doesn't mean joining Jesus' team, wearing his logo,

incorporating his name into our trademark. It always feels strange to read an obituary that lists church membership along with, and somehow equivalent to, belonging to Rotary or Easy Eagles or the Masons. Being a member of the body of Christ is different. It's not an affiliation; it's an identity. It should be our fundamental identity. Becoming a follower of Jesus—and here's the scary and challenging part—means actually becoming Jesus in the world. I'm not saying that Jesus is somehow limited by our limitations; or that Jesus isn't at work outside the confines of the church; but I am saying that when we commit ourselves to be part of the body of Christ, we commit ourselves to trying to be Christ in the world.

We don't know what eventually happened to the man Jesus healed by the pool of Bethesda. But we do know of people whose lives have been changed, whose lives have been saved, by encountering the Jesus who is alive in his church, people who, with a little help and love were able to turn their lives around. I think of the people in NA and AA who come to this church some evenings to find mutual support in overcoming addiction and reclaiming their lives. We have become a welcoming venue for changes that are wrought not by us, but by God's spirit and God's promise.

But, truth be told, the vast majority of people whom we in this church have helped in their time of need never return to say thanks, never let us know how their lives are going. Most of them flit into our lives and then out of them again, often without a word of thanks, without telling us how things have turned out for them. I remember a woman who came to my office in our Rhinelander church one summer afternoon. She was on the run from an abusive spouse who had just been released from prison. She was about to violate a court order and drive with her children to her parents' home in a distant state. I assumed she wanted money to help with the costs of the journey, and I was going to have a moral dilemma, called aiding and abetting a crime. But she just wanted a place to pray and someone to pray with her; she wanted a safe place where she was reasonably sure she wouldn't be turned in to the police. So pray we did, and I often wonder what happened to her. And I pray about that, even though I never heard from her again.

The story of the man by the pool in Bethesda tells us all that that is OK, that faithfulness is more important than results. Jesus did what he could to give those who came to him a new lease on life. He did it even though he might be accused of being a bleeding heart, a sap, a sucker. He did it without

expectation even of thanks, much less a reward. Because that's who Jesus was. And that's who Jesus calls us to be. Amen.