

ACTS 16:9-15
PSALM 67
REVELATION 21:10; 22-22:5
JOHN 14:23-29 or 5:1-9

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 22, 2022; Year C

Forget the Pool!

Several years ago, the automotive giant Nissan conducted an advertising campaign for its Exterra, a SUV designed to offer the basic necessities associated with these kinds of vehicles. The slogan they adopted stated proudly, “Exterra: Everything you need; nothing you don’t!” The campaign proved to be highly successful because this SUV has maintained immense popularity, proven by its excellent sales history. Evidently, Nissan tapped into some concerns now driving much of our societal demands and discourse, that in many respects we are looking to simplify when and where we can, that we long for some basics, some easy to grab handles as we negotiate life’s overwhelming complexities. Indeed, life in this not-yet-post-COVID, but definitely postmodern, twenty-first century, mistrusting, distrusting, context is complicated and convoluted in so many ways. No wonder, so many folks long for the salad days of nostalgia, a Camelot, that while those wistful moments clearly exist in the rearview mirrors of our memories, what is often referred to as a “simpler time,” we know in our hearts and minds it never really was! All these memories of wanderlust, clouded by the rearview mirrors of time, continue to be so alluring for so many who long to escape the painful realities that continue to haunt our humanity, disturbing every level of our human being and doing. You know the things to which I am softly and subtly referring! The Nissan Exterra experiment, along with today’s Witness from the Gospels in John, reminded me of these ongoing dynamics driving the yearnings of so many today who are longing for a time of less demands, less stress, less open hostility and hatred. The question posed in this query is, “why have these urgings

not translated to our religious life, specifically our Christian landscape?" Two thousand years of weighty ecclesiological and theological baggage has made the faith that once was all about, solely committed to, following the way of Jesus' way, way too complex, complicated, and convoluted, an exercise demonically devoted to the futile demands expressed and exacerbated by allegiance to nonsensical religious psychobabble! Like the Puritans back in the formative days of New England Congregationalists, we continue a tradition long preceding their narrow strictures, going out of our way to make the Christian faith as difficult as we can, as if that somehow legitimizes our spiritual prowess and our devotional pursuits.

The Johannine writer along with the compilers of the Gospel of John recall a simple story about Jesus, describing one of his numerous encounters, his frequent engagements with a person who could have had any one of a variety of needs. As we are accustomed to reading in the Gospels, we find an infirmed individual who in this case was desperately in need of an obvious physical healing, no doubt carrying in his being a thorn in his flesh that was tormenting and torturing the unnamed and unknown man, inflicting some seriously significant emotional, mental, and spiritual damage. Whatever cross he was bearing, whatever load he was carrying, it is obvious he was living his own private and public hell, enduring his own personal but not-so-private persecution. In this instance we find someone who, like many with suffering similar circumstances, we can assume was a lost soul in so many respects, perpetually grinding the life of an invalid. According to the story he had persevered with this affliction for thirty-eight long years. The author does not name the man's specific malady. His illness is never addressed and in so many respects must therefore be irrelevant to the story or to our interpretive purposes. What we know is that the numbers of sick were many and all longed for one thing in common, to be healed, to be cured, and made whole. What we know about this man's pitiful, pathetic, plight is that he would be classified,

categorized, compartmentalized—branded or labeled—as what we now hopefully call “differently abled” in our ongoing attempt to be more inclusive, more open and affirming of those whose lives are marked and sometimes marred by obvious physical and/or mental differences. Unfortunately, we have not come a long way from using the derogatory term “handicapped,” or as my late ex-mother-in-law used to call it, “handicrapped!” Just look at our signage! And while we are at it by the way, “disabled” is not a much better, much more endearing, adjective! But I digress; I often do!

As we resume our story, we learn that Jesus had gone to Jerusalem to observe one of the many festivals on the liturgical calendar, an event that the Gospel writer chooses, no doubt by intent, to not name, something I perceive to be significant in this narrative. Normally, when we read of these kinds of episodic visits from the rabbi, we are told plainly and specifically the nature of the occasion, the reason for the journey. For whatever reason, or at least reasons unbeknown to us at the beginning of the narrative, on this feast day Jesus and his entourage of disciples wind up at a pool located near the Sheep Gate, called Bethesda in Aramaic. We are told that this area of the opulently adorned Temple complex is ornately surrounded by five covered colonnades, providing some contextually descriptive specifics to enliven the text. We first learn about the Sheep Gate in the Book of Nehemiah (3:1), that it was rebuilt by Eliashib the high priest along with his fellow priests, the only gate consecrated because of and for its holy purposes. It was called the Sheep Gate for a very simple reason; it was the entrance through which the unblemished lambs, pure and spotless, passed, meticulously bathed in the pool, each one carefully chosen to be sacrificially slaughtered, its blood spilt on an Altar that for all intents and purposes served as an opulently appointed carving table. It served as the entryway into the Temple compound, leading directly from the sheep markets for these little innocent lambs’ date with destiny, truly a one-way ticket as an instrument of ritual

purity, seeking the forgiveness of what was often perceived to be an angry, retributive, judgmental, and vengeful, always threatening punishment deity. The pool by the same name served as the place where the misfortunately selected sheep were washed in preparation for their impending doom. Satchel Page once said, “someone got to scape the goat!” Well, for the fate of these sheep deemed pure, there was no escape! One word of note and trivia: supposedly Jesus always entered Jerusalem through this gate except for his infamous and so-called triumphal entry, ushering in a week of passion, his final week. The Sheep Gate also led to Golgotha, the pathway Jesus was led on his trek up the hill to be crucified. And with all that interesting, but maybe not so intriguing, information serving as background, the stage is now set for a typical dialogue between Jesus and a stranger now friend and brother in need, nothing ever typical about any of his encounters and engagements.

In other words, Jesus’ coming to this general location would have been a normal part of his coming and going, his ordinary routine, a familiar place to stop and hang out with other Temple attendees. Yet even so, Jesus, as part of the rank and file, technically was never supposed to enter this private area, the Portico of the Temple hidden in an alcove, safely tucked away from the masses. The ill and lame could be “put away privily,” to use an image reserved for Mary the mother of Jesus in the scandalous echoes hauntingly informing certain parts of the infancy narratives. Those who were ceremonially or ritually tainted because of their afflictions were conveniently ushered into a corner, summarily put out of sight and out of mind, hidden in the dark recesses, emotionally far removed from the “normal” worshippers, evidently even segregated from the court of the women and perhaps even that of the Gentiles. Ironically, this somewhat saved them from public scrutiny, sparing them at least some level of embarrassment or humiliation! It is exactly the kind of place where Jesus would go, the kind of place we would not be surprised to find

him! Anyone who knew him, would not be shocked to discover him seeking out these perfect examples of the last and least! And yet, despite the numbers of infirmed individuals gathered at this sacred and supposed source of healing, Jesus zeroes in on this one man, pointing him out of the crowd as if he were the only person there, in that moment, the only person on earth, a very Jesus-like trait that would serve so many of us well in our own caring capacities if we could somehow patiently patient and emulate that myopic degree of focus. If we could just bottle it! It is obvious that Jesus took pity on this man as he was lying there in his permanently prone position at this prime location, hoping it to be the perfect spot for his delivery, no doubt looking much like the mystery man beside the road in the parable called the good Samaritan. Jesus innocently inquires, "Do you want to get well?" Well, what kind of a stupid question was that. Of course, the man wanted to get well, or be well, or made whole, or you pick your favorite biblical metaphor for said healings. Why else in the world would the man be at a pool known for its healing powers? Surely, he was not there to watch a sheep get a bubble bath! Well, the man had what surely was a not so unique problem brought about because of his unfortunate circumstances, his bad luck or misfortune.

According to the legendary myth cast upon these special waters, its supposed magical, miraculous, properties were only stimulated whenever the water was mysteriously stirred. The man said in frustration to Jesus, "Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me!" Yes, there is always a line-breaker in every crowd, someone always jockeying for position, stepping over whoever might be in their way, someone trying by any means necessary to get ahead at someone else's expense. For whatever reason, Jesus does not respond with a sympathetic ear that simply hears a problem and recite some inane religious mumbo jumbo, some theological psychobabble, quoting scripture, lamenting about the way things are,

acknowledging how unfair life can be. Jesus does not tell the man how sorry he is about his plight, refusing to wallow in empathetic jargon, acknowledging how the deck must have been stacked against him or even worse, invoking the ancient Hebraic idea that his parents surely must have really sinned big and pissed off God and that he was receiving a just reward, cruel punishment heaped on him because of their, or their parents', or their parents' trespasses, yes, to the third, fourth, and even fifth generation. Jesus does not even bother to offer to help him into the pool, but rather, comes up with a much better idea, a much more satisfying solution. **"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!"** And just like that, with those proactively direct words, the man was healed, completely cured, surely made whole in the process, a complete and total restoration and renewal, yes, he too was raised to new life, another illustration of resurrection power. **With no additional commentary by either party, the man picked up his mat and went on his merry way,** save for the rest of the story! When confronted by the Pharisees about healing on the Sabbath, the fear-filled man threw Jesus under the bus with a finger-pointing "he done it!" No good deed goes unpunished! **Forget the pool! Pool being a very poor metaphor, symbolic of every negative impediment, debilitating malaise, anything that limits or stifles capacity or creativity, all seeking to demoralize and diminish our humanity!**

While this is a great story not unlike other Jesus' kinds of healing stories, I think there is a deeper message in the offering in this version, a meaning hidden but surely transparently lurking if we look hard enough. I believe the essence of this edition far transcends just another ordinary, routine, healing, again, just one of many found throughout the Gospels. **My sense is that this transaction was Jesus' subtle way of confronting convention, of being unconventional, of going rogue, of going against the intuitional and theological grain that was so deeply imbedded at this point in time in traditional Judaism.** As you are aware, there were certain expectations, protocols, processes and

procedures, all designed to ensure that the proprietary product of religious ritual purity was maintained. It was mandatory in the system that those in charge had to sign off on anything of a spiritual nature that crossed their path, yes, a systemic nightmare of epic proportions. **As one preacher (Earl Gwynn) once noted, the problem metastasized because the man was bound to his infirmity, the Pharisees representing the Jews and their faith tradition once and for all set by their forebears were bound to the law, and Jesus answered to a higher authority, honoring a covenant solely bound to God, the one he intimately knew as his Father, his heavenly Parent, Abba, all of which meant he was unbound in every way imaginable! As was often the case, this event took place on the Sabbath, a day on which almost everything was considered work and thus most human interactions were disallowed! Oops! Jesus did it again! Oops! Of course, part of these quasi-spiritual machinations guaranteed that the religious leaders, those in authority, always got theirs, assuring them far more than their fair share as if they were entitled to any of it, that some money changed hands based on whatever transactional sacrament took place. You had to say the right words, go through the right motions, cross the proverbial “Ts” and dot the “Is”, all in the correct order under heavy micromanaged supervision. It is the same overwhelming and overbearing layers of minutiae that we have compounded with interest upon Christendom for more than 2000 years. In the earliest days of the fledgling faith, all the “followers of the way,” what Christians were called before they were called Christians, all they had to do was follow, follow in Jesus’ very large footsteps, his footprints making an indelible image wherever he went. The goal was to be like the human Jesus in as much as humanly possible, to become the Christs in the world, to bring a Christly Spirit to a hurting humanity. The command was a simple one, to love God and neighbor and self, follow what came to be called the Golden Rule, doing audaciously Godlike things that reflected that ancient desire first read in the Hebrew Bible in Deuteronomy (6:4-5) called the**

Shema Israel. As Michigan state senator Mallory McMorrow said in a wonderful diatribe, rebuking a senate colleague who had personally attacked, a soliloquy that went viral, one for the ages, “My mom taught me a young age that Christianity and faith was about being a part of a community. . . . that service was far more important than performative nonsense like being seen in the same pew every Sunday or writing ‘Christian’ in your Twitter bio and using it as a shield to target and marginalize already-marginalized people.” Amen! Love in every instance is an active verb, in other words always demanding action, i.e., doing something, doing stuff! And the something, the stuff, we are called to do with every breath we take, just as it was in Jesus’ day, is galvanized around social justice issues, doing for and with the least and the last, yes, of these and those! Yes, it amounts to what for many, if not most of us, is a proverbial broken record, calling us to feed, to quench, to clothe, and to visit, but also to invite and welcome, to include, to make sure there are no others, none left out of the ever-widening circle, hospitably relating to the people the Hebrew Bible refers to as aliens, foreigners, and/or strangers, to guarantee that “others” do not even exist in God’s realm on earth or in the mystery of the heavenly places.

Somehow, unfortunately, the early Church quickly got off track and lost its way, embracing an image of Christ who looked surprisingly nothing like the lovingly mild-mannered person in Jesus the man from Nazareth, a real, historical figure who exuded gracious mercy and peace in his demeanor and whose moral compass demanded that he fight for a socially just society, but rather a Christology that ironically appeared much more like, mirroring the Romans’ deities, Caesar in particular. Yes, they copied names that emulated the powers and prowess of those in charge of their miserable occupation, those who constituted the Jewish adversaries of the day. Jesus, as Christ, came to be called by every flowery and flattering name once solely reserved for the Caesar in power. Blasphemy! Jesus never wanted any title whatsoever! Read it

for yourself! Sadly, this attempt to one up or show up the Caesar backfired and created an institutional monster, a juggernaut seeking prestige by a predominately male clergy acquiescing, even sometimes subservient, to the “powers and principalities” of the world, then and now! He would always respond to those inquiries about his mysterious incarnational identity, “you say!” The image of Christ quickly devolved into a warring image who was going to return to earth in a very bad mood to separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, yes, let us name it, the saved from the damned. Theologically known as the “Parousia,” i.e., the second coming, this fallacious fantasy was given a made-up marketing moniker, “The Rapture!” Not going to happen, at least in the technicolor disaster models advocated by the various millennial nutjobs! Christianity also devolved, emphasizing a focus on belief as faith, concerned with right ecclesiology and theology, obsessed on getting it just right, demanding that adherents embrace a specific set of rubrics articulated in just the right narrow fashion. The Christian faith followed the same pattern of most religions of the world, buying into certain precepts, demanding uniformity, and requiring rituals that met specific sacramental standards. How deviant, dull and boring! This initially Roman Catholic inflexibility, promulgated as Church Teaching or the Tradition when the Bible was not sufficient enough to oppress when it failed to acquiesce prevailing ecclesial winds and sufficiently support the latest Papal pontifications, was seamlessly transferred to Protestantism, despite sincere efforts to stem that tide, hardwired or codified in nineteenth century revivalist evangelicalism. The result was a transactional religious equation demanding that a convert get “saved” by accepting a laundry list, litany was too polite here, of fundamentals while reciting a public profession of faith that was clearly and narrowly choreographed, orchestrated by a continued line of male clergy intent on keeping and exercising full proprietary power and control, while stifling freedom of thought and any progressive expression. I grew up learning the five inarguable fundamentals of this faithless enterprise. They included: the inerrancy

and infallibility of the Bible, including a six-day creation; a literal interpretation of miracles; the Virgin Birth; Substitutionary Atonement with its nonsensical understanding of an angry and child-abusing God who needed to sacrifice “His” son in order to be appeased; and, the bodily resurrection of Jesus. In case anyone is wondering, I am five for five as to what I cannot accept or believe in any literal way! I am not alone!

The reason I point out these things, things that are both painful, repetitive and redundant, and all at the same time, for so very many of us, is that the Church, by and large, continues to hold to vestiges of an ancient and archaic, prescientific, understanding of mythologies that by default naturally permeate the biblical narrative. The result is that postmodern, twenty-first century, post-scientific, critically thinking, intellectually curious individuals are leaving the steeple at an alarming rate. And yet we keep thinking if we just develop the right programming, the backsliders will all come flocking back to our doors, finding their dusty pews! Not! And let us acknowledge for full disclosure that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with good programming! As the late John Shelby Spong used to say, these are now the members of the Church’s alumni association, and their numbers are growing exponentially by the day. Postmoderns, and that includes everyone alive on this planet today, must be aware. The bottom line is that progressives, a select percentage of individuals who refuse to drink any institutional religion’s Kool Aid or Kook Aid, are open to a variety of avenues they gladly and gratefully employ in the hopes of enhancing their spirituality. Even so, they have no desire to be “religious,” to commit to any organized or even disorganized religion, to adhere to any institutional Christianity dictated by dogmatic doctrines expressed in flowery and flattering creedal Churchly vernacular, a language that long ago, for the most part, except as occasional insider speak, a vocabulary that has ceased to be relevant, having clearly served its purpose, fulfilled its role, its shelf life very short indeed when measured

against the arc of time. It is as if much of this flowery but sometimes forgettable language was frozen in time on the day this dangerous, damaging, and often deadly fluff was written. Four things inspire these kinds of folks. The first is that they long for community, a place to build authentic, genuine relationships that are honest, exuding integrity and an integration of being: emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. The second is that they long for a safe space, devoid of judgment, literally a sanctuary environment allowing, even encouraging, skeptics and cynics, agnostics and atheists—anti-theists—to raise the critical questions about life and living, the Bible, and every aspect of religiosity that piques their interest. Third, they desire to join a community that is socially active, that is busy about the business of doing and making a difference, yes, once again ringing the social justice bell, seeking to move the moral arc of the universe, bending it toward justice for all. Finally, they long for a community that is committed to absolute welcome and invitation, holistically inclusivist regarding all persons, persons of every stripe, color and creed, yes, “extravagantly welcoming,” expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and openly vulnerable, yes, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey!” Our UCC slogans do fit the bill to a tee! **These kinds of people long for communities that accept individuals just as they are, no matter race or cultural context or sexual orientation or gender or whatever! These seekers are also extremely interested in matters not just limited to ecumenism, call that a baseline expectation, but of engaging and even embracing interfaith dialogue and relationship, finding the good, the great, and the useful, the efficacious, in every other religious tradition. It is for these reasons that books, such as the recently published and released book by Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age,*” are being written, very popular and relevant to those of us hoping to stem the losing tide of declining church membership, striving to at least maintain numerical status quo. These, my friends, are the things that matter most and at all! Forget the pool!**

So, on a certain day Jesus healed another hurting soul, restoring his spirit as well as his whole person. Jesus did not ask him what he believed or even if he had faith, though we can deduce that this newly minted man probably was a faithful Jew based on where he was located, at the pool at the Sheep Gate at the entryway to the Temple. But not only did Jesus not interrogate the man, inquiring of him all kinds of litmus tests, the secret handshakes and passwords required to gain admission to the club, demanded as irrefutable and inflexible requirements to determine the level of his never-to-be-assumed fidelity, his sworn allegiance, to his orthodox Jewish religiosity, but Jesus seemed not to care about the traditions, the protocols, the processes and procedures, germane to the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus did not care about nor bow to this special pool, its purpose, and its rubrics. Forget the pool! Don't sweat the small stuff! Ignore the trivial, the minutiae of ecclesiological double speak, theological psychobabble! Jesus seemed to care even less about anything that even remotely smacks of or even hints of ritualistic formalities and parroted promises of pabulum, Pollyanna and otherwise, impediments that oft times merely serve to diminish rather than enhance our spiritual practices, sometimes hindering or inhibiting, even prohibiting our best intentions altogether. Jesus simply saw a need and met it, healing the man, curing the man, right there, on the spot, literally, no questions asked, no affirmations required! Me thinks there is a lesson in this lesson that we all desperately need to learn and absorb into our individual being and corporately as beloved faith community, the local missional church known as First Congregational United Church of Christ. We must make these welcoming and inclusive, initiatives second nature, solely committed to this degree of radical hospitality, making them part and parcel of our spiritual pathway, yes, our unique religious experience even as we dare share our testimony, our witness, find the resolve, the audacity to communicate this radical level of loving grace, mercy,

and peace with anyone, anytime, and anywhere, every “other” person on the planet. “Others” being the operative word! Me thinks that Jesus bids us go and do likewise! Jesus’ teaching and preaching, Jesus’ mission and ministry: It’s got everything you need; nothing you don’t! Forget the pool! You simply don’t need it!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and has given us a roadmap for what truly matters! Amen and amen!