

Text: John 5: 1-15
Title: At the Bottom of the Pool
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Roger Allen Nelson

Two snapshots.

For longer than she can remember she's longed for her husband to stop drinking, be present in their marriage, and be his best self. Every day for years she's prayed for, fought for, and struggled for his sobriety. There were lulls, moments of magic, hints of hope. And then he'd go off the rails, more secrets seeped out, or there was an ugly crash ~ car crash, emotional crash, relationship crash, spiritual crash. She'd swore she'd leave him, only to keep praying again and again and again and again, until she ran out of words or tears, with no idea why God wouldn't help....

Gloria Copeland, evangelical advisor to President Trump, offered this encouragement earlier this week:

So, how do you keep from getting the flu? Well, first of all, as believers in Jesus Christ, we don't have a flu season. We may have a deer season or a duck season, but we don't have a flu season. Why? Because Jesus bore our sicknesses and carried our diseases, and by His stripes we were healed.... We've already had our shot...Jesus bore the flu for us! That's what you stand on. If you don't have the flu, that's the way it should be! Keep resisting it with the words of your mouth by saying, "I will never get the flu. Flu, you're not coming on me or my family!" If you've already got the flu, Jesus is the answer for that, too! Jesus bore the flu for you, so you don't have to bear it any longer. Pray this prayer....

You get the idea.

There is a tough-tangled-knot in how we think about healing and its relationship to faith. Those two snap shots get at either end of the knot: God is inscrutable and uninvolved. God is a helicopter parent who would protect us from every ill. Most of us live in the mangled-muddled-middle.

The gospels are full of pictures where Jesus heals the lame, the leper, and the infirmed. Many of you would bear witness to healing for which you credit doctors and medical technologies, but you also claim the power of prayer and the will God. And many of you know stories of disease and despair and unanswered prayer. So...

So, what are we to make of the relationship between faith and healing?

What are we to make of this memorable and mysterious text?

Is there here some light for our journey?

Skiers who get too far out over their skis end up a tangled pile of limbs and lumps. I hope to keep my skis under me in this little meditation. You will not find here a full-bodied theodicy. Expectations for answers will be disappointed. But, in this story, that only

shows up in John, is there something helpful as we think about the knot of healing and faith?

If you go down the slope of the Mount of Olives, toward the walls of Jerusalem, the Sheep Gate is to your right. And as you go through that gate, just to your right, is the entrance to Saint Anne's Church. Where, under layers of building and destroying and rebuilding and destroying, archeologists discovered two pools with five porticos.

Our text reads that Jesus entered Jerusalem through the Sheep Gate, but rather than make his way to the temple or the palace, rather than check in with the preachers or the politicians, he took a right and went to a gathering of the disabled who surrounded a swimming pool. That's not to be cute, that's a literal rendering of the Greek word.

Speaking of the Greek...

If you remember this text from a previous reading you might recall something about an angel stirring the pool. It makes for a colorful memorable image. However, biblical scholarship suggests that line was added later to spice up the story. The idea of an underground spring that occasionally bubbled up and caused the water to move is not nearly as sexy as a descending angel, but it seems closer to reality....

One infirmed man had been lying there for 38 years ~ almost the fullness of 40, almost a lifetime. When Jesus learned this, he asked the man, "Do you want to be made whole?"

That's an odd question to ask one waiting on healing for longer than many of you have been alive. But, rather than answer, "yes," the man launched into excuses. "I can't get into the water fast enough. No one will help me. People step over me. I am all alone."

There is something mighty sad here....

A lifetime without friends or family to help.
A lifetime of seeing others healed.
A lifetime of buying lottery tickets without a winner.
A lifetime of praying.
A lifetime of blaming others.
A lifetime of waiting.

To which Jesus says, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."
That's it. There's nothing else.

Dear friends, there's a long preaching tradition of lifting up this chap as a hero of faith. At the words of Jesus, he did as he was instructed. He didn't hem and haw, he didn't vacillate or equivocate, he didn't quibble or question, he got up and walked. He trusted in Jesus and stepped out in faith....

And you can do the same. Do you want to lay there waiting and whining or do you want to be healed? Trust in Jesus and get on up! Can I get an amen?

There is part of me that understands that line of reasoning. With alcoholics, or addicts, or you name it, I've lost track of how many times I've wondered if they were really at rock bottom and if they really wanted to be made whole. Were they ready to take the steps that lead to sobriety, or sanity, or safety?

Maybe that's part of the mystery of why some get healed and some stay sick.

The comfort of lying by the pool is easier than the hard work of standing up.

The familiarity of a lifetime is better than the uncertainty of new steps.

There's security in crutches; there's insecurity in learning to walk.

And, I don't know what set of circumstances will make this trip to rehab, or this journey to the therapist, or this conversation with the doctor the definitive moment of standing and walking. Everybody's journey is different, but there must be something about human responsibility and initiative....

Right?

Truth is something in us likes the gumption of getting up, rolling up our mats, and walking. We might be healed by Jesus; but we did our part. We took responsibility. We trusted and obeyed. The man by the pool was on welfare for 38 years but now he's working. He grabbed hold of his sandal-straps and yanked himself up. He's not like those who, to borrow a phrase from Chief of Staff, General Kelly, "were too afraid... or too lazy to get off their asses..."

Thanks be to God.

But, we have to do our part.

Right?

The emphasis in that take on this text is the response of the man. Except he proves to be something of a weasel. When the religious authorities see him walking they ask why he's carrying his mat on the Sabbath, because according to the prophet Jeremiah:

This is what the Lord says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem.

In the *Mishnah* there are 49 forbidden acts on the Sabbath, the last of which was "carrying things from one domain to another." You're allowed to carry a man on a bed, but you're not allowed to carry an empty bed. So, rather than celebrate his healing the religious authorities niggle him about breaking Sabbath law.

In turn he blames Jesus.

"Look, I was only doing what the guy told me to do...."

"And who is this fellow?"

"Um, yeah, never really got his name...."

And then to top it all off, when Jesus tracks him down a second time, he runs to the Jewish leaders to turn him in....

How's that for gratitude?

He's a whiner and a snitch.

Is he really the faith hero of this story?

Is his response the point of the text?

Dear friends, let me suggest three themes that we can claim with some certainty.

This is, first and foremost, a snapshot of God's grace.

Jesus heals the one with no guts, no gratitude, and no glory. He heals the one who didn't display any faith or demonstrate any spiritual commitment. He heals the one who didn't do a thing to deserve healing. He heals the one who didn't even ask to be healed. All the poor bloke had to offer was his broken body and his broken soul. And Jesus made him whole. Fred Craddock says that this passage is a parable of radical God's grace ~ the undeserved, unmerited love of God.

Second. There is something instructive in the instructions of Jesus.

Jesus knew when he told the man to take up his mat that he was breaking the religious rules of the day. It's almost as if he was baiting the religious leaders. Biblical scholars, no less than John Calvin, suggest that Jesus knew what he was up to. He was setting in motion a series of events that would ultimately expose the emptiness of legalism and get Jesus crucified. Maybe this is a snapshot of the death-grip of religious rule-keeping and the freedom that grace brings.

But. With regard to faith and healing, I keep coming back to this.

So, three....

In some way we are all lying by the pool hoping and waiting and longing to be healed. We are all broken.

We may be praying fervently and trying our hardest.

We may be wishing for the magic in the water.

We may be paralyzed with uncertainty.

We may have tried everything we can think of.

We may have given up.

We may feel as if we're all alone.

But, brokenness is what we all have in common.

There is not one of us that is wholly whole.

And yet, the great claim of the gospels is: "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son..." The purpose of God in Christ is to save, heal, and make people whole. What we can't do for ourselves ~ no matter how hard we try, no matter how long we wait ~ God does in Jesus Christ. He didn't come to condemn but to save...

And therefore, as that is true, then any and every expression of healing is the will and work of God in Christ. Healing may take all sorts of forms and use all sorts of tools. We may see God's hand in our healing, or be totally blind to it. We may give credit to the power of prayer, or only trust the power of good doctoring. We

may think it is our own strength and courage, and it may never cross our minds that it is the will of God....

But, whenever or wherever there is an expression of healing, the grace of God, the unmerited undeserved love of God in Christ, is at the bottom of the pool. Every expression of healing is an expression of the will of God.

That doesn't mean that where there is no healing God is impotent, ignorant, or indifferent. There is no telling why some diseases run hard and brutal courses. There is no telling why some are healed as they hoped while others know something very different. But it is to recognize that finally and fully all healing, all saving, is the work of God in Christ....

Dear friends, some of us know the healing that we hoped for, and others know healing that came in surprising ways and down hard rocky roads that you wouldn't want anyone to traverse. Some of us have stories of taking up our mats and others have only known waiting by the pool...

But for all of us the love of God in Christ is the last word.

And that is a word of saving and not condemning, healing and not abandoning.

May our lives be marked by gratitude,
may we bear witness to the one who made us whole.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.