Sitting by the Pool
Rev. Jim Tippins
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It was common for the sick and disabled to gather around artesian pools for the healing and therapeutic effects of the water. But there was one with mysterious reputation. Tradition said that a couple of times a year, an angel came and stirred the water. The first person in the water was healed of their infirmities.

Apparently there was not much warning before the water became agitated. So the sick, broken, injured people waited years for the event. (Some Biblical scholars suggest we read verse 4 as a footnote. Many early manuscripts do not contain the v.4.)

The Pool at Bethesda was a large pool surrounded by five porticos. It was a unique place in the city. The pool had five shaded areas with high columns connected by a roof of some kind. It was located close a gate into Jerusalem.
And this is not the place where the up and coming are gathered. This is not the good side of town. This is the nearest thing to a hospital ward. Jesus comes to Bethesda and he initiates a conversation with a man by the pool.

These are a few things we don't know:
We don't know the man's ailment or condition.
Did he have a disease or an illness? Anthropologists distinguish between *disease* (a biomedical malfunction afflicting an organism), and *illness* (a disvalued state of being in which a person's social networks have been disrupted and social significance lost, which can result from a disease or tragic interruption in existence.)

We don't know the about the angel tradition. There is not much historical literature that describes angels showing up to capriciously deliver healing, especially to only the lucky or the quick. (Seems like the unlucky and slow are the ones who would need the healing the most.) But in 1888, while the church of St. Anne in NE Jerusalem was being repaired, a reservoir was discovered. On the wall is a faded fresco that depicts an angel troubling the water.

Why is he alone? Has he alienated all who could or would help him?
Why does Jesus chose this man? He is not loudly declaring his faith like the lepers in Jesus meets on the border of Samaria and Galilee. This man does not even know who Jesus is.

Whatever this man's status- he is without.
Without help, without hope,
without friends, without family,
without faith in anything except a magical stirring of the water.
What we do know:
We know that Jesus went to this place intentionally.
We know the conversation begins with Jesus.
We know the man had been by the pool for 38 years.
We know that is the Sabbath, the time from sundown on Friday until the sunrise on Saturday. The Jews were prescribed to limit their activity and rest. The Mishah which are extensive interpretations of the Law, were very clear what was allowed and what was not.

Whatever this man's condition- he is within.
He is within the view of Jesus,
He is within reach of healing,
within hope,
within the moment of a divine appointment with the
only one who could heal him.

Jesus asks the man, "Do you want to be well?" a simple and clear question. The man doesn't give an answer but gives an excuse, "Sir, when I try, someone else precedes me."

We see this often in health care. People know what they need and what they need to change to improve their health. But what they want is someone to stir the water for them, carry them to it and put them into the healing. They don't want to quit smoking, lose weight, cut back on sweets, take their medicine or treatments. They are passively waiting, just like this man.I hear their stories of pain, alcoholism, addictions, loneliness, and lostness. I hear their cries for help.

Years ago I volunteered in a community benevolent program much like our Barnabas Center in Fernandina. As people shared their stories of financial or familial troubles, I would often take my guidance from Jesus. I would ask, "Do you want to get well? Do you want this to get better." Then I buckle up. Here come the excuses. "I tried once and it didn't work out….It's my parent's-boyfriend's-children's-bosses fault….. If I only had a few more dollars a month…. I know I have a problem but I went to a meeting once and no one talked to me…..It's really not my problem but his/hers….

Scottish writer, Peer Gynt, reminds us of the human tendency to be passive. He says, "To think of it,
to wish it to be done,
to will it to be,
but alas to do it? This is past my understanding."

There is no recrimination in the words of Jesus, just the command. "Rise up and take up your bed and walk." This is the same command that Jesus gave the man lowered into the room thru the roof in the Gospel of Mark. However, in that healing, Jesus first offers him forgiveness of his sin. Not the same sequence in this healing.

Can you imagine the crisis of faith that was required here? Thirty-eight years by the pool, and some man walks up and says, "Rise up and take up your bed and walk."

No lights or halos. No bells or thunder. No showy, attention getting special effects. He just got up, picked up his bed and walked away. Notice the silence. He does not ask Jesus anything. He does not give any response. No rejoicing of celebrating. He just walks away. Thirty-eight years by the pool and all he does is walk away, in silence.

His whole existence is changing. Now he can walk, stand, and see people eye to eye. He can go to the temple to worship. He can return to his family and home. He only knew himself as the broken, cast off, lonely man he had been. Instantly everything he understood about himself is changed.

People would have to refer to him differently. People only knew him thru the lens of his disability now they would have to see him thru the miracle of his healing.
"You know Marcus, the cripple, Oh, yeah, he used to be."
"You know that man who was always lying by the water at Bethesda, I saw him at the market, standing!"

Martin Luther called this miracle the Fracture of Grace. The world was changed by the offer of Grace to the man. This whole moment is the compassion of God… the presence of Jesus….. the question of change….. the struggle to decide…. the rising of the healed man. Grace.

There is the other storyline going on here. It has to do with the religious leader's response to the healing.

The Mishah contains all the human expansion of God's commandments given to Moses. Among those was one that allows you to carry a bed-but only if there was a person on it who could not move on their own. To carry a bed roll on the Sabbath was not allowed. The Jews who were watching Jesus took offense at the not at the healing but the carrying.
Again there is silence
Silent instead of rejoicing.
Silent instead of awe.

It is important to see the real power of this miracle. It is not the faith of the man but the power of God.

Calvin Miller's trilogy, The Singer, The Song and The Finale, is an allegorical telling of the life of Jesus, the birth of the Church and end of time. The Singer is the one who is bringing the Star Song from the Earth Maker and does battle with the World Hater. One of the stories in the Singer is of a man who is confronted in his despair by the Singer who is the allegorical Jesus.

The man is a miller by trade. It seems that many years before, his hand was crushed by a millstone and the he carries an intense anger at God because of his accident and his deformity. He is accustomed to life with one good hand and one really bad attitude. People defer to this man and give him wide berth because of his mean temperament. The Singer has compassion on the man because of his broken hand and heart. The Singer offers the man healing if he will reach out.

The miller rejects the healing because to be healed would be too much of a change. It is better, he thinks, to have a crushed hand and life as he knows it than to accept the healing and the changes in his life that will follow. He would have to live without his pain and his rage at God.

What is it in your life do you wish for? What is it you have prayed for? Have you prayed for help but turned aside because of the changes it would bring?

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Notes:

Did he look around for help? Did he whine and complain about the command. Did he look for someone to blame for his brokenness and weakness? We don't know. All we know is that he got up.

When do our church or religious rules keep people away from the saving, healing presence of Jesus? Brian Stoffregren, CrossMark Resources, tells this story, “I remember a lady complaining about teenagers coming to church in blue jeans. She was especially upset when they went up for communion in unacceptable attire. They shouldn't be doing that. Would she rather have them in church in blue jeans, or have her rules keep them away?”

Malina and Rohrbaugh (*Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*) write about this verse:

If we assume that Jesus' reference to something "worse" happening to the man is a reference to his illness, the puzzle is indeed present. Jesus seems to be threatening another disease if the man should sin again. But if we recognize that in Mediterranean societies "sin" is a breach of interpersonal relations, there ceases to be a problem. For if sin is whatever destroys one's relationship with the group, and if we note that this man was devoid of friends to put him in the pool, Jesus' comment makes perfect sense. As a friendless outcast, the man was indeed a "sinner," an outsider unattached to a group. He may have been sick, but he was also ill. Given his age and the short life expectancies in antiquity, should the man repeat whatever disrupted his relationship with the group, he would indeed risk the worst of all fates: having no one to bury and remember him. [p. 112] **Brian P. Stoffregen, CrossMarks Christian Resources**

To expand on a question I raised earlier,

Jesus then dramatically clarifies himself by healing the man on the spot. But note how reticent the passage is about the man’s response. Sometimes the silence of the biblical narrative speaks as loudly as the dialogue. Apparently the man does not bother to engage Jesus in further conversation, for later he says he does not even know his benefactor’s name (5:13)! When Jesus comes again to the obtuse man to give advice regarding the healing, does the man ask why Jesus chose him or how he should live his life in response or who Jesus is? No. Again the silence of the passage suggests that the healed man does not take any steps to grow in his knowledge of Jesus. Indeed, the only thing he really learns about Jesus is his name, which he promptly reports to the Jews. Even Nicodemus knew as much as to call Jesus a rabbi and a teacher who comes from God (3:2). And unlike Nicodemus, this paralytic is never heard of again in the gospel. Discipleship in John: Four Profiles," Mark F. Whitters, Word & World: *Theology for Christian*