

John: Poolside Miracle

John 5:1-15

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After these things there was a feast of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem a sheep gate a pool which is called in Hebrew, *Bethesda*, having five porticos. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame and withered waiting for the moving of the waters. For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water. Whoever then first after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted. And a certain man was there who had been thirty-eight years in his sickness. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been along time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. But while I am coming, another steps down before me." Jesus said to him, "Arise, take up your pallet and walk." And immediately the man became well and took up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day. Therefore the Jews were saying to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Take up your pallet and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your pallet and walk?'" But he who was healed did not know who it was. For Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well. Do not sin anymore so that nothing worse may befall you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for this beautiful story, and we pray now this evening with the help of Your Spirit that we might profit from our time together, from our time in your word, and for this time of prayer and fellowship. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now John tells us, as we've had occasion to point out before, towards the end of

the gospel, one of the reasons why he writes this gospel and why he chooses some of the stories that he includes in this gospel, is that in order that those who read his gospel might believe. It's an evangelistic tract. That's why, I suppose, Billy Graham and folk like that have told young converts to go and read the gospel of John because John gives testimony after testimony as to who Jesus is and why Jesus came into this world. John tells us, in fact, that if all the incidents were to be included in the book that all the books in the world wouldn't have been sufficient.

It's not hard for us to surmise why John would include this particular story. It would be interesting but futile, of course, to ponder some of the stories that weren't included but why was this one included? That's fairly obvious, I think, because the clue is that this story is a paradigm for the way in which Jesus comes into the lives of those who are destitute, of those who are unable to do anything for themselves, and transforms their lives. Isn't that what Jesus has done for you?

I. Man's hopeless condition.

I want to look at the story because it unfolds, I think, in five stages. This is a Calvinistic sermon; it has five points. The first of which is the hopelessness of this man's condition. We are told in verse five that this man had been sick for 38 years. He had some kind of paralysis. He was unable to move by himself; he was unable to get others to get him to this pool, as the waters were stirred, apparently some spring broke forth disturbed in the first place by an angel, we are told—whatever all that means. The first one into this pool would be healed. Now, I don't understand that. That's part of the miracle narrative of the first century of the time of Jesus. The point is that this man was unable to get to the waters because someone else would get there first and receive the blessing. He's been in this condition for 38 years. That's a long time. This isn't something recent that might in the ordinary process of events begin to unravel into some quality of life. It's something that's been with him for almost four decades.

In a sense it's further underlined for us in the way John goes on to say that this man was in the presence of the very one who could do something about it, but he doesn't know that or appreciate that. Indeed, at the end of the story, he doesn't even know who it is who had healed him. He doesn't even seem to know his name. This is a picture of someone who, in an altogether hopeless condition, can do absolutely nothing for himself. It's a kind of parable, isn't it? A kind of parable of the human condition.

The fascinating thing about it is that though this man is surrounded by people in very similar conditions—some blind and some are lame and some are paralyzed—what John wants us to see is that the amazing thing is that Jesus comes to this man. He selects this man. He shines the light of His grace and mercy upon this

man. Perhaps this is the very worst case of all of all the images of destitution and dereliction around Him; this was the worse possible case--this man. And Jesus uses him to teach something of the amazing quality of His grace and mercy.

You see, there could hardly be a better way to illustrate the principle that the salvation that you and I enjoy in Jesus Christ is a salvation that He provides, that He gives. In a sense there is something of the operation of the absolute sovereignty of Christ in the healing of this man.

You know, I suppose had this man lived in our time and had he had a hymnbook and a pianist, he might have sung some of the hymns that you and I love to sing. I love gospel hymns. You know tunes and hymns are married together, until death us do part in my book. There are certain tunes that are married to certain words and as soon as you hear the tune, the words of a hymn come into your mind. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Don't you think those words might have become familiar to him had he lived in our time?

When the Puritan Lord Berta was visiting Warwick Castle, one of the sights to see, a beautiful castle still in very good order, in late 17th century or so, and when the local magistrate heard that he was there asked him to visit the prison. And there were three prisoners who were facing execution the next morning. George Burta went in to visit them and talked with them and tells of one of the prisoners, and this is what the prisoner said to him, "I never killed anyone; I never hurt anybody. I hope the Lord will have mercy upon me." And this alarmed George Burta because the man had committed a crime and had been found guilty of the crime and he was going to pay the consequences of his crime, but he still wasn't willing to confess it even though he was dying the next day. And even on his way towards the platform where he would be hung, the Puritan yelled out to him, "Please sir, don't trust in your own righteousness. Look to Christ!" And those were the last words that man ever heard. Well, here's a man in this story who is in an absolutely hopeless condition.

II. Secondly, the unexpectedness of Jesus' question.

In verse six, we are told that when Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" Now stop a moment. Here's a man who's been sick, paralyzed for 38 years, and Jesus is asking him the question, "Do you wish to get well?" Sometimes, when we read the Scriptures, there are sentences that just, as you Americans say, 'Blow you away.' This is one of them. Of course he wants to get well. Who wouldn't want to get well. Who wouldn't want to be healed from this paralysis. And yet, our Lord, the perfect pastor that He was, who knows how to put His finger right on the pulse of where we are, was perhaps asking the very question this man needed to hear, because it is possible, isn't it, after 38 years,

to have so grown used to our condition, to have so begun to depend on others to do things for us, to so perhaps lose faith entirely in the very possibility of getting better, that perhaps the question that he needed to hear the most was as to whether or not he had any desire left to get better.

You see, it's not a stupid question. It's not as silly a question as it may at first appear. Because I think Jesus is driving at something that's at the very heart of this man's problem. His problem was more than just his physical paralysis. His problem lay deep-rooted in his will and psyche. He was at the place where healing was possible. He was in the presence of the one who could make that healing possible, and it's possible to be in this place and to choose not to have the blessing.

Do you follow what I'm saying? It's possible to be in the company of God's people, under the sound of His word, and choose not receive the blessing. And John is including this story, you see, because the question that Jesus asks him is the very question that this gospel confronts us with. Jesus is able to transform through personal repentance and forgiveness, and the transforming power of His Spirit, and the question is, "Do we desire it. Do we want it. Do you want to be made whole?" That's the issue. It's the issue in evangelism every time. Do you really want to be made whole?

For more than 20 years, Professor Edwin Keaty of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, used to start his classes by writing on a blackboard two numbers, the numbers 2 and 4. And then he would ask his audience, "What's the solution?" And, one student would shout out, "6" and another student would shout out, "2" and another student would shout out, "8" and Professor Keaty would shake his head and he would say, "Gentlemen, unless you know what the problem is, you cannot possibly find the answer." The problem that this man was facing was more than physical paralysis. The problem this man was facing was desire. Do you want to get well? Do you really want the blessing? I'm almost tempted to stop right there. Because maybe that's our problem here. Can I say that? Do we have a problem here at First Presbyterian Church, of any description? Of course. Every church does. Maybe the real issue is one of desire. Do we really want to be filled with God's Spirit, because if we are, we will never be the same. Life won't be the same. Our homes won't be the same. Our marriages won't be the same. Our children won't be the same. Our church won't be the same. Our priorities won't be the same. Our schedules won't be the same. That's the question. Do you want to get better?

III. Thirdly, the power of Jesus' commands.

Jesus says to him in verse 8, and it's one of these wonderful statements that you find in the gospels, "Arise, take up your pallet," or take up your bed, or your mat that you would roll up, "and walk." Arise, take up your pallet and walk. You have

to try to put yourself in the picture here, of a man whose been paralyzed for 38 years. There's a sense in which this is cruel, isn't there? Because if Jesus were saying that, and it was utterly dependent upon this man to obey it, it would be the height of cruelty to say to him, "Arise, take up your pallet and walk." But this is Jesus who is speaking, this is "the Word who was with God and was God, and became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory." This is the Word who made the heavens and earth, and remember, John puts it in the negative in the opening prologue, "There wasn't anything that was made that wasn't made with Him." He made everything. The Creator is standing before this man. The One who said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The One who formed and fashioned the universe, the stars, and the planets.

My son and I and Rosemary and the dog were out this past week looking at the space station. You know, you can see it going across the sky. You can go to a website and they'll tell you exactly what time it appears. It's only there for about five or six minutes, and it goes across the sky. They'll give you a map with stars, and directions, and tell you what time it will appear. And sure enough, we were all out there, and the dog is looking up at the sky, and this little orange glow appears and travels across the sky until it hits the earth's shadow and then disappears. Staggering. And you can't help, but you're looking at this, and the stars that are beyond it and some of them are twinkling, and we got the telescope out and saw Saturn's rings, just phenomenal stuff. Jesus made all of it. Jesus simply called it into being. And He's saying to this man, "Arise, take up your bed and walk." He doesn't say to him, "Now, exercise three years of penitential prayer. Send Me fifty dollars and I'll send you a handkerchief that I've blessed." Jesus doesn't do that sort of thing. When Jesus heals, He heals with a word of power.

That's why C.S. Lewis said that those who say Jesus was only a moral teacher, are on the same plane as the man who says he's a poached egg. Either Jesus is a lunatic or else He is God, because of the things that He says. And He says to this man who's been paralyzed 38 years, "Arise, take up your bed and walk." Jesus only needs to speak a word, and it is done. That's the power of the Jesus that we worship, as we come to Christmas. The One who's lying in the manger is the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth.

IV. Fourthly, the bitterness of Jewish opposition.

We have comedy and tragedy linked together in this story. "Pick up your mat and walk," Jesus says, and here he is walking through Jerusalem. Now, if a man has been paralyzed for 38 years, and he's been in Jerusalem all that time, everybody in Jerusalem knows it. They know what he looks like. They know his name. When they see him walking with a mat tucked under his arm, looking as pleased as punch, unable to contain himself no doubt, singing at the time of his voice, shouting to people, "Look at me," I know, I'm adlibbing. But they recognized him,

and what do they say? What's the first word that comes out of their mouths? Turn to verse 10, I'll read it to you. "It is the Sabbath." Isn't that amazing. Here's a man who has been healed after being crippled and paralyzed for 38 years, and the Jews of Jerusalem can only think of one thing: it's the Sabbath. You see, they had written a book on the Sabbath, and it was called, *The Sabbath and How Not to Break It*. And Jesus was writing, before their eyes, another book, and it was called, *The Sabbath and How to Enjoy It*. The book they had written said, in chapter 4, paragraph 6, section 15, subsection 347, "No mat carrying on the Sabbath." But actually that's not what the Old Testament had said. The Old Testament had said that you must not do any unnecessary work on the Lord's Day. No carrying loads in order to make profit on the Sabbath. But it was the Lord's Day, and one of the prophecies of Isaiah 35 was, to the effect, that on the Lord's Day the lame would leap for joy. They had no joy, because they knew nothing about grace. You see, without grace law become legalism, without an enjoyment of grace, without knowledge of the forgiveness of sins coursing through our veins. Do you see what this says about the Jews in Jerusalem. They couldn't give anything for this man or his sickness, or his disease, that's not what they cared about. They didn't care. And that says a whole lot about them. All they were concerned about was, "No mat carrying on Sunday."

Well my dear friends, I've met Christians just like those. And I'm saying that as one who upholds the abiding sanction and law of the Fourth Commandment, what these people are saying is, "I don't care about the lost." Do you remember what Paul says, 2 Corinthians 5, "From now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view." His burden all along was to see men and women brought to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. That's my concern.

V. Fifthly, and finally, the challenge of Jesus' exhortation.

It's fascinating. Jesus finds him in the temple, and in verse 14, this is what He says to him: "Behold, you have become well. Do not sin anymore that nothing worse may befall you." Stop sinning, or something worse may befall you. I don't think, though commentators are divided, that Jesus is necessarily saying that the reason for this man's paralysis is that he had sinned in some way. That's not the inference that we're meant to draw. What we are meant to learn is that the evidence that this man has truly come to know who Jesus is and loves Him with all his heart, the evidence of that, of a changed heart, of a converted life, of a regenerate soul, the evidence of that will be that he will not go on sinning anymore. Not that he will be sinless, but that his desire will be that he be free from sin.

Now let me issue that as a challenge. Of all the things that you long for the most, I wonder if that's right up there as number one? "I wish, I wish with all my heart, that I didn't keep sinning. I wish with all my heart that I would never sin again." Because that is the mark of a regenerate person. That's the mark of someone

who is in love with Jesus Christ. Do you remember how Augustine so self revealingly put it? "Give me chastity, but not yet." And I wonder, if we secretly have within our hearts a similar desire, because we are too much in love with the world, and not sufficiently in love with Jesus. I want above everything else, to be like Jesus. Let's pray together.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You now for this beautiful, astonishing story, full of twists and turns as it is, and we pray that our greatest longing and desire might be that we might be more like You. We know that one day we shall be like You and we shall see You even as You are, but today we are too conscious of our own sin and our own failure and our selfishness and our own greed, and our own desire to do what is right in our own eyes. We pray, Holy Spirit, transform us and mold us and shape us more and more into the image of Christ, for Jesus' sake we ask it, Amen.

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