

Easter6_YrC_050513
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, who creates us, saves us, and blesses us. Amen.

Today's lesson from the Gospel of John is a little bit strange. I don't mean that it is strange because it is unfamiliar. In fact, it is so familiar that you may have missed one of the strange parts of this strange reading!

Back in the day, when we heard anything read from the Bible, it was always the King James Version. In this reading from John in the KJV, there was another verse in the beginning - verse 4 - just after the description of the people who were hanging out at the pool. It read like this:

Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.

Do you recognize that? Well, it's still in the King James Version, and the New King James Version and a couple of other versions of the Bible, but more advanced scholarship reveals that it was probably not there in the original manuscript. Maybe it was a legend. Maybe it was a modification of a story from some other religion. Who knows?

At any rate, scholars translating bibles into the Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version (which is what we read from now), New International Version, The Message, and others, decided that it should be left out. So they did.

[But here's the part you might want to amaze your friends with: because the story was so well known, these scholars felt that changing the numbering of the verses would confuse everyone - or at least all those 'chapter and verse' folks. So when you go home, if you look up chapter 5, you will see that the verses are numbered 1,

2, 3, 5, and so on in one of the translations I just mentioned, but 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc, in a KJV!]

Perhaps even stranger, however, is the fact that when Jesus asks the paralyzed man if he wants to be healed, the man replies that he doesn't have any one to put him into the pool when the water is stirred up, and that, therefore, someone gets ahead of him into the pool and is the one healed.

Goodness! Did they not realize that NOTHING makes sense if they take away the verse about the angel but don't explain what the heck the paralyzed man is talking about?! So much for inerrancy!

But I digress.

Stranger than the goings-on behind the scenes with the editors of the Bible is the story itself. Most of the healing stories about Jesus in the other Gospels involve people of great faith who have asked Jesus outright to help them, or, like the woman with the 12-year hemorrhage, someone whose faith is so great that Jesus can sense their need.

In this story, Jesus approaches the man, this one man out of many, many others and asks him if he wants to be made well. Why that man? Why not the blind woman next to him or the lame man over in the other portico? How did he know the man had been there for 38 years? He asks the question, "Do you want to be made well?" And the guy doesn't give him a straight answer. No 'Yes' or 'No'. He just sort of whines about how he can't get to the pool in time. (I have to say that, if I'd been there that long, after awhile I'd probably stay right on the edge of the pool so I could stick my hand in there as soon as the water started to move!)

And besides not giving Jesus an answer, he didn't really seem to have any faith at all. He might not have even known who Jesus was! But isn't it just like Jesus to go on and heal him anyway! He says, "Take up your mat and walk." And the man does just that - leaving without even so much as a 'thank you, sir.' How ungrateful!

(Pause)

Now the other really strange part about today's lesson has more to do with the Lectionary Elves - the people who decide which Gospel we are going to read from and which chapter and which verses from that chapter.

As we've already mentioned, today's chapter is 5, verses 1-3 and 5-9. Remember, verse 4 has been edited out. So the last verse of our reading today was this: "now that day was a Sabbath." As if is almost a throwaway line - 'and they all lived happily ever after,' or even just 'the end.' But that isn't the end of the story. It was VERY important that that day was a Sabbath!

You know why, right? Because God rested on the 7th day. Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. Because no work is to be done on the Sabbath. And practically everything was considered work on the Sabbath.

So there were more verses in chapter 5 to tell the rest of the story.

Now that day was a Sabbath. Oops!

The Jews saw the man carrying his mat, and they said, "It's the Sabbath. Don't you know that it is unlawful for you to carry your mat?" And he said, "The man who made me well told me to take up my mat and walk." Oops!

So they asked him who the man was who had told him to take it up and walk. And he didn't know. He had not known who Jesus was and didn't bother to ask him after he had be cured. Later on, though, Jesus saw the cured man in the Temple and said to him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you."

The man went away and told the Jews it was Jesus who had healed him. Oops!

Then the Jews started persecuting Jesus because he was doing such things on the Sabbath. (They were very unhappy with him.) But Jesus told them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. Oops!

Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing; and he will show him greater works than these, so that you will be astonished. Oops, oops, oops!

You can see now why Jesus was in trouble. Working on the Sabbath. Equating himself with God. Being a little smart aleck with the Jews. He had been saying to others that he had come to fulfill the law. Breaking the Sabbath was not exactly going to accomplish that.

But Jesus didn't heal this man at the pool or anyone else in order to make a point with the Jews. He did it because the man needed to be healed. And Jesus healed this man not because of who the man was, but because of who Jesus was.

So let's go back for a second and look more closely at what Jesus said to the man. Take up your mat. Does it sound at all familiar? Little girl, get up. Stand up, take up your bed and walk. The word that Jesus uses is, in the Greek, the same as the word for resurrection. We've heard that a lot here at All Saints, haven't we? And using that word means everything in this context. Yes, this man was healed physically. But Jesus not only healed him physically - he gave the man *new life*. In effect, the man was raised from his 38-year-long dead state to a new life of wholeness and worth.

And isn't that what Jesus comes along to give to all of us as well?

Sure, we say that.

But don't we spend a lot of time searching for wholeness and worth in the material things of the world around us - you know, wealth, property, physical security - things that don't really have any capacity to restore wholeness in the first place.

Aren't we all in some way waiting to be healed by the stirring waters? Aren't we all part of a great multitude of humans who can't quite get there on our own, who need help getting into that pool?

So we might as well be invalids lying by the side of the pool for years, waiting for something magical to happen. The angel never appears, the water never stirs, and

we are just as broken today as we were yesterday, never realizing that our wholeness, our worth isn't about things we are seeking.

But then Jesus reaches out to us, and our waiting is over, and our healing begins. This is a story about God's grace - the undeserved, unearned love of God. Jesus brings us life, while everything else just brings waiting.

From our Collect of the Day, again:

Birthing God, whose Spirit's wings stir the waters of creation: hear our stories of paralysis and exclusion; accept our desire for welcome and acceptance; and lead us to find our dignity in your gift; through Jesus Christ, the healer. Amen.