

Easter 6, Year C
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

In Jesus's day, there was an old legend in Jerusalem
about the Bethzatha Pool.
It was said that this pool was supposed to have healing powers
whenever its waters were stirred up.
Legend said it was an angel that did the stirring.

Now, whether there was any validity to this, I can't say.
Seems a little questionable to me.
But even today, people like to go and sit in hot tubs,
we like to feel the warm water gurgling around us,
like to sit in front of the jets,
and it certainly can make aching muscles feel better.

So I guess I can understand why,
as our Gospel story says,
numerous invalids would go down to the pool by the Sheep Gate,
and wait there for a chance to get in
when the waters were agitated
so they could be healed.

But it was a chance-y proposition at best.
Because the magic, if it existed at all,
seems to have been limited to one person at a time.
The first one into the pool collected all the healing.
The others were out of luck.

Our Gospel story this morning
zeroes in on one of those luckless also-rans,
a man who had been ill for 38 years.
We're not told exactly *what* his illness was,
but apparently he had limited mobility,
because others always made it to the pool ahead of him.

Out of all the people there that day,
this is the one Jesus approaches.

“Do you want to be made well?” Jesus asks him.
 What an interesting question.
 Very insightful.
 I think we all have known people
 who seem to *enjoy* poor health.
 There are some people whose whole identities
 are bound up in their illness or disability.
 Indeed, poor health can be a shield some people use very effectively
 to protect themselves from criticism,
 or from others’ expectations,
 or a socially-acceptable way to explain away failures.
 Poor health does have its benefits.

So this is really quite a good question for Jesus to ask
 rather than just assuming
 that someone who had been ill for so long
 surely must want to be made well.

And notice how the man answers this question.
 He doesn’t!
 He doesn’t say “Yes, I want to be made well!”
 He doesn’t say “Are you kidding? Of course I want to be healed!”
 He doesn’t say “I would give anything to get my health back.”

Instead, he offers up an excuse
 as to WHY he’s still sick,
 even after 38 years.

“Sir,” he says, “I don’t have anyone to put me into the pool
 when the water is stirred up.
 And if I try to get in by myself, someone else beats me to it!”

Now, I’m not quite sure what to make of this non-answer.
 But Jesus doesn’t hesitate.
 “Get up,” Jesus says to him.
 “Pick up your mat, and walk around.”

And we're told that at once the man was made well,
and he picked up his mat and started walking.

Now at first glance, this seems like just one more story
in a long line of miraculous healing stories
involving Jesus.

Jesus was always healing people.

But if you look more closely,
you can see that this story
really is NOT like those other stories.

Because unlike other stories of Jesus's miracles,
there is not one word about faith in this story.

There is not a single hint
that this man believed in Jesus
or in anything else
except maybe the magic water in the pool.
And we're not even sure he believed in that
because up to now,
all he's offered is excuses.

It's too bad that our lesson for this morning ends where it does.
Our lesson ends on the fact that this all happened on the Sabbath,
throwing that in almost as an afterthought.

But if we keep on reading, we discover why that's important.
Because pretty soon, Jewish authorities see the man walking,
carrying his mat.

And guess what:

It was against the law to carry a mat on the Sabbath.

When they confront this newly-healed man,
we learn that, really,
he doesn't appear all that grateful to have been healed.

When he's accused of breaking the law,
again he simply offers an excuse.

"Hey, I'm just doing what the man who healed me told me to do," he says.

"I was only following orders!"

"And who was it who healed you?" they wanted to know.

Because healing on the Sabbath is also a no-no.

"Um, I don't know," he said. "I didn't catch his name."

It seems he walked off without thanking Jesus,
 or even bothering to find out who his benefactor was.
 Still later, Jesus finds him in the Temple,
 and says to him, “Look, you’ve been made well.”
 And then Jesus says something very cryptic.
 “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.”

Now what’s THAT about? What sin are we talking about?
 Jesus clearly knows something about this guy that we’re not privy to.
 We’re not told what his sin was.
 But we’re told what he does next,
 and it’s not very nice.
 Now that he knows exactly who it was that healed him,
 he goes straight to the authorities and fingers Jesus
 as the one who illegally healed on the Sabbath.
 How’s that for gratitude?

Out of all the needy people at the Bethzatha pool that day,
 THIS is the guy Jesus picks to heal.
 This unnamed guy,
 who shows no gratitude, no faith, no humility, no guts.
 He didn’t deserve to be healed!
 He didn’t deserve anything.
 And this is the one Jesus healed.
 The one who just made excuses for his failure.
 The one who blamed others for his own lack of success.
 An ungrateful ne’er-do-well.
 This is the one Jesus chose to heal.
 Why? Why?

I think the answer to that question is the message of this story.
 Jesus healed this man
 not because of who the man was,
 but because of who Jesus was.

You see, this really is a story of God’s grace,
 of the undeserved, unmerited love of God.
 That’s a radical idea,
 and it’s right at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus.

It's the reason Jesus could say
"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
Not because of who they are,
but because of who YOU are, as my disciples.

We talk a lot about the grace of God in church,
that God loves us because of who God is,
not because of who we are.
We say God even loves us in spite of who we are.
We're pretty good at acknowledging
that God's love encompasses all of us,
even those who we, personally, find it difficult to love.

And yet, when we talk about helping others,
loving others even as God has loved us,
reaching out to those on the margins of society,
it seems that often as not we're really talking about
helping the "deserving poor,"
those we call the "truly needy,"
or those we call "citizens."
Those who we consider undeserving –
or possibly undocumented –
we feel much less call to help.

So we pass laws that make it more and more difficult
for those folks stuck down by the poolside.
We make it more difficult
for them to qualify for public assistance
and to obtain health care or job protections.
We pass laws that make it more difficult
for children who don't speak our language
to get an education.
We separate children and parents at our border,
and we break up families through deportation.
We support laws that deny basic human rights
to certain classes of people
that we consider undeserving of greater protection.

As a nation – and often, as a church –
we offer our help, not because of who we are,

but because of who THEY are,
not because we're called to be healers and instruments of God's grace
as disciples of Christ,
but because, and only IF, they *deserve* to be healed.

I don't know how it is with you,
but I'm grateful every day
that God deals with me
according to who God is,
not according to who I am.

Interesting, isn't it,
that the pool in this story
is right in the shadow of the Temple,
right outside the church.
How many hurting people do you know
who have left the Temple,
left the church,
to go sit by the pool?
How many people have been forced to put their faith
in superstition,
or in demagogues,
or in crazy ideas,
in things that really cannot help them?
How many put their faith in a lie
because institutional religion
wanted nothing to do with them,
because they were undeserving?

So they went to the pool.
And so did Jesus.
That's where Jesus healed.
Down by the poolside.

Where are the pools in our community
where we ought to be going to bring healing?
Who are the people we've turned our backs on
because they didn't show us gratitude,
or they lacked the proper etiquette,
or they simply don't deserve our help?

And what does it say about who we are
if we let any of that matter to us?

Our Lord chooses the most undeserving,
the most unworthy,
the most ungrateful.

In short, our Lord chooses us.

And showers us with unmerited grace,
because that is God's nature.

And if we are children of God,
are we not called to do likewise?

Amen.