

10 November 2019

Jesus Meets a Blind Man

John 5:1-15

We continue our examination of one-on-one encounters with Jesus described in the Gospel of John. We've talked about Jesus and Nicodemus, Jesus and the Samaritan Woman, and today we come to one of the strangest encounters of all, which will have much to teach us about the nature of faith. We read John 5, verses 1-15.

5 After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. 3 In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed— [waiting for a stirring of the water; 4 for an angel of the Lord went down at certain times into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well of whatever disease that person had.] 5 One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' 7 The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.' 8 Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' 9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a Sabbath. 10 So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.' 11 But he answered them, 'The man who made me well said to me, "Take up your mat and walk." ' 12 They asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Take it up and walk"?' 13 Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. 14 Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.' 15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Given the Gospel of John's stated purpose – that people might find faith in Jesus – we have been looking at a series of one-on-one encounters with Jesus in that gospel as examples of different sorts of faith. The religious leader Nicodemus, for instance, was an example of a wistful, would-be-but-not-quite faith. The Samaritan Woman, by contrast, showed us an awakening of faith in a marginalized person. Today we meet another of those marginalized people, a man in Jerusalem who had been ill for 38 years with some affliction that prevented him from walking. The text doesn't say what that was, but tradition refers to him as the *Lame Man*, so we'll use that name for convenience.

Before we work more closely through the story, we should take a moment to deal with the curious background, regarding the Pool of Beth-zatha. To put it another way: An angel used to do *what*? The story was that every now and then, an angel would come down and stir the waters of the pool, and whoever got into the waters first after that would be healed. As a result, people with illnesses lay clustered around the pool all the time, watching for a ripple. Now, I believe in miracles. I believe that God can and sometimes does intervene in the natural order. But

that doesn't mean that every miracle story is genuine, and frankly this sounds like a local legend. It certainly doesn't sound like God. A god who distributes random healing to whoever can push to the front of the line doesn't bear much resemblance to the God of the Bible. That was what people believed, though, and the Lame Man had apparently been there for most of his life.

So Jesus goes up to him and asks, "Do you want to be made well?" Which is a curious question, isn't it? I mean, why did Jesus think he was there at the healing pool? Duh. But Jesus actually does this often. In Mark 10, when blind Bartimaeus gets his attention on the road, Jesus looks at Bartimaeus kneeling before him and asks, "And what would you like me to do for you?" Well, what does he think? Bartimaeus has to spell it out for him, "Lord, I want to see." And here's Jesus doing the same thing to this Lame Man. Except . . . the Lame Man doesn't answer the question. Instead he says, "Well, how can I be healed? I've been lying here all alone all these years, with no one to help me, so when the waters are stirred up, everyone else pushes in front. You would think that they would respect seniority, but no, they all only think of themselves and their own problems. No one ever spares a thought for my troubles, or how long I've been here, or notice that *my* sickness is much worse than those other people's. But what can I expect? This is how I've always been treated. Still, I never complain."

So then, without responding to the man's words, Jesus just heals him. "Be well. Pick up your pallet and walk." And the man is healed. Now we come to the second part of the story. It seems that this day is the Sabbath, when Jews were forbidden to do any work or carry any burdens, and when the religious leaders see this man walking around carrying his bed, they have a cow. "What do you think you're doing? This is the Sabbath!" To which the Lame Man responds, "It's not my fault! The man who healed me *told* me to do it!" Now, I'd like to imagine that a spiritual leader, upon being told of a miraculous healing, might inquire further about that. These don't, though. "What man? Who told you to break the Sabbath?" And the Lame Man replies, "I don't know. I didn't ask."

They apparently let the Lame Man go, because a little later, Jesus finds him and tries to spell it out for him. "You've been healed of one thing. But there is more healing available. Put aside sin and know true healing." And how does the man respond to Jesus' invitation? He goes at once to find the religious leaders and says, "I found him! The man who made me break the Sabbath! He's name's Jesus, and he's over there. I *told* you it wasn't my fault!"

As we look at these characters in John as examples of faith, I think it's safe to say that the Lame Man is not exactly St. Francis. Not a hero and model of faith. But the important question for us to ask is why not? What was it that prevented this man from responding in faith Jesus, even after he had experienced Jesus' healing power? When I talked about the Samaritan Woman's willingness to believe, I noted that she was already at the bottom of the heap and had nothing to lose, but this man, if anything, had even less to lose and much more to gain, and he still doesn't respond with faith. What went wrong?

Well, perhaps he did have one thing to lose: his old life. To be sure, his old life was horrible by any objective standard, but it was *his* life. He had a regular, stable routine in which he was the center. Everything in his existence revolved around him: he was the one who deserved

pity and special accommodation, he was the one who was always being ignored and mistreated by others, he was the victim. Nothing was his fault, not his illness, and not his failure to be healed, not his Sabbath misdemeanor. It was all the fault of others: those other people who were so self-centered that they didn't care about him. His old life revolved entirely around himself. His illness was his identity, and he bore no responsibility for anything. He was a victim, and the thing about being a victim is that it makes everything about you, and that can be hard to give up. So, in fact, Jesus' question – "Do you want to be made well?" – was a real question. And there's a reason the man avoided answering: because the answer, it seems, was no.

And you've known people like that, too: people who draw their identity from their problems and so make sure that everyone knows all about them. And as with this man, none of their problems are ever their own fault. It's amazing how badly everyone always seems to treat them. Every time they make a new friend, the same thing happens. After a while, the friend starts to pull away. For some reason. (I saw a headline on a humor website the other day: "Woman with String of Failed Relationships Trying to Figure Out Common Denominator.") Such people share certain traits: constant complaining, inability to maintain relationships, and a lack of gratitude. All of this characterizes the Lame Man, and all of these traits are barriers to faith. Genuine faith involves a relationship with Christ. If you can't maintain relationships with people, you probably can't do it with Christ either. Genuine faith is about receiving grace. If you are unable to be grateful, you cannot recognize grace. And perhaps most of all, a genuine faith will change you. Faith is a transforming experience. Paul calls it "becoming a new creature" and "putting off the old self and putting on the new." This transformation is good – "healing" is a perfect word for it – but it's still change, and if you aren't willing to change, you cannot understand faith. Jesus' question to the Lame Man is the faith question for all of us: Do you want to be made well?

Before we go any further, we should note that there are some other characters in this story: those religious leaders who heard about a miracle being done and didn't care, didn't even seem to acknowledge it, because they were focused on who to blame for a minor infraction of their rules. Like the Lame Man himself, they were uninterested in change – miraculous or not. They had a world that they liked very much indeed, a world in which they and their rules were at the center, and as a result they were focused exclusively on any disruptions to their order. They were unable to recognize the power of God when it was right in front of them, because they weren't looking. If the Lame Man represents an inability to believe, so too do these religious leaders. They couldn't believe because they didn't want anything to change. Lack of faith is largely a lack of imagination. Faith is a transforming power, or it is nothing. Faith that doesn't change you isn't faith, because where there is no risk, there is no need for faith.

I want to conclude with a contemporary reflection from this, about the church, and specifically about the United Methodist Church. Since at least the 1970s we have been wringing our hands over our decline in numbers and influence. That decline continues, as yet another national study showed just last week. I believe that the core reason for that decline is that we grew so comfortable and made our brand of Christianity so easy, so tame and inoffensive, that there was no risk in becoming one of us. But without risk, Christianity doesn't require faith. It becomes a lifestyle choice, and not a particularly compelling one. And we have gone about

trying to fix our decline in every superficial way imaginable – with new programs and professional consultants and marketing strategies – all of which required many meetings and much busy-ness but, again, no risk, because we weren't looking to change. The goal has been to find some way to maintain our church in the manner to which we have become accustomed. Like the Lame Man sitting by the well, we have grown so comfortable that we've mistaken the edge of our rut for the horizon. Our story today is both a call to faith and a warning that faith brings change, and Jesus' question still echoes: Do we want to be made well?

Some of you have probably been wondering if there was a typo in the bulletin today. Did I mean to call this sermon, "Jesus Meets a Blind Man"? Yes, I did. This is the story of a man – or, shall we say, several men – who upon encountering a sign of God, see nothing at all. Next week, we'll meet an actual blind man who sees more than all of these put together.