

6 Easter, John 5:1-9
Rev. Kimberly Glenn
May 25, 2025

May God be merciful to us and bless us. May God show us the light of his countenance and come to us. Amen.

Today our gospel text is about a man who is stuck. He seems to think he is stuck because of what other people have not done for him. He has been stuck for thirty-eight years. That is a lifetime to be so close and yet so far from his ultimate goal. Let's talk about his circumstance because there is a lot wrapped up in the story that is worthy of unpacking.

First, there is his physical location. The text tells us that this man is lying in one of five porticoes that surround the pool of Beth-zatha in the city of Jerusalem. This public bath house is a healing bath house because the waters in the pool are believed to have healing power when it moves, when it is "stirred." The name Beth-zatha is a Hebrew name meaning "House of Mercy." According to the text, the people who came to that place were invalids - lame, blind and paralyzed - each presumably hoping to be healed of their disabilities by the waters. I find myself already judging this man for not having made it down to the healing waters in thirty-eight years. I keep thinking, my God, man, you could have rolled down to the waters or scooted or something by now. No wonder Jesus asked him, "Do you *want* to be made well?" It certainly seems as if maybe something was holding him back from actually getting there. Maybe he was secretly afraid of what would happen to him if he was suddenly able bodied. Maybe he was fearful of what might be expected of him. Was he really *that* eager to change his circumstances?

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Can you think of places where disabled people gather together in this twenty-first century? I can. I'm not thinking of hospitals or clinics. I'm thinking of drug abusers who gather in the streets and under bridges in our cities. I'm thinking of people who gather in crack houses and in dark alleys where crime is rampant. These are people who are addicted to not only chemicals but to a way of being that relieves them of responsibility. Being healed of their disease would mean that they would be expected to take responsibility for themselves. That is hard. It requires more than medicine. It requires a strong and healthy spirit. It requires faith in God and in themselves.

Evidently, it seems, Jesus intentionally entered the House of Mercy. He had recently established his credentials as a healer. The text tells us that he had just healed the son of an official in Capernaum. He apparently intended to bring healing into the House of Mercy. Maybe, though, what he saw was the possibility that these people, these invalids, didn't know the treasure they all were in God's eyes. Maybe he could help them see that the way out of their circumstance involved more than immersion in the water of that pool. The text tells us that the pool at Beth-Zatha was just inside the Sheep's Gate in Jerusalem. What the people around the pool in the House of Mercy did not realize was that Jesus himself was the gate, the gate that leads to abundant life. Walking through that gate, through the Jesus gate, requires not strong physical bodies but strong spiritual faith.

The man, ill for thirty-eight years, never made it to the stirred up waters in the House of Mercy. The presence of Jesus, the Word of God, healed him. Jesus said to him, "Stand up. Take up your mat and walk." And the man did. But the text tells us that it

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was the Sabbath that day. That had implications for the man, and it had implications for Jesus. The religious leaders strictly enforced the law that there could be no healing on the Sabbath. The act of healing was considered work. As was the work involved in taking up the man's mat so the man blamed the infraction on the man who had told him to do it. He showed that he was not ready to accept responsibility for his actions. He was used to making excuses for the things that happened to him, used to pointing the finger at others for what they had done or had not done. He was not accustomed to looking inside himself to consider what he had done or not done to make the situation what it was. The man was avoiding taking responsibility for himself and his future.

It certainly makes me wonder whether that man ever truly wanted to be healed. Was he stuck in the rut of finding comfort in his routine, making his way to the edge of the waters at Beth-Zatha but never getting into the stirring waters? Was he actually afraid of what might happen if the circumstances for him changed? Are our fellow humans who persist in homelessness because of addictions, or who spend a lifetime in prison because of a life of crime afraid of what might be required of them if they made a change in their lifestyles? Are we afraid of what Jesus might lead us to do if we step outside of our comfortable lifestyles and routines in order to further his ministry in the world?

When I hear Jesus say to the man at the pool at Beth-Zatha, "Take up your mat and walk," I immediately think of another time that he asked his disciples to take something up. Remember, Jesus asked them when he was on a journey with them, and he asks us now, to take up our cross and follow Him. He never asked anyone to

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worship Him. We do worship Him though. We find that our spiritual strength is restored when we worship Him. We are fed at the Lord's table, we are forgiven for what we have done and left undone, we are sent out into the world to be Jesus' hands and feet in the world when we worship together. But our worship is not for Jesus, it is for us. What do we do for Jesus? How do we respond to the wondrous gifts that He gives us? He wants us to respond by following Him.

There is a song that I learned once when I led the youth at my church to a retreat at Shrine Mont. The facilitator for the weekend that year was Fran McKendree. I know Fran led one of the Parish Retreats for Grace Church years ago. Fran was a songwriter who played his guitar and led the youth on a journey to know themselves better and to know Jesus better through song. One of the songs he taught us was one written by a man named John Bell who was born in 1949 in Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, Scotland. How's that for coincidence, I mean how is that for a God Wink? The song he taught us is called The Summons, one of John Bell's most famous hymns. The first verse of that song goes like this:

Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown
In you and you in me?

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When I hear those words, I know that I don't follow Him closely enough. I allow the temptations of the world to distract me. I allow the things other human beings do get to me. I let them annoy or hurt me. But I know deep inside that my love for God and Christ and their love for me overshadows the annoyance and the pain. Worship here at Grace Church helps me to remember that. I hope worship and fellowship here at Grace Church helps you to remember that, too.

Let Jesus heal and make you whole in our worship together. And then when you hear Him call your name to follow Him, you will be ready to pick up your mat and walk with Him. Are you ready to let go of whatever is holding you back? My friends, the light of Christ will show you where He wants you to go. He has promised that He will go before you and will meet you there. Amen.