May 1, 2016

John 5:1-9

I don’t know if you ever check the footnotes when you’re reading a book--I hardly ever do, but I also know that if you don’t you can miss something really important. Because the story we just read comes with a footnote—one of those little, out-of-the-way parts of the story that may not show up in the earliest editions of the Bible, yet is so very significant—helps us understand what was going on, here. See, according to local legend, the water in the pool at *Beth-za-tha* (this picture being where scholars think it was, and still is today):



…but that pool would occasionally gurgle—like, bubble up—almost like a hot tub, with jets--likely from an underground spring that fed it… Meaning the locals came to believe that the bubbling--the “troubling” of the water (as they called it)--was caused by an angel—“God gonna trouble the water!” And when the water got stirred—even if for just a moment—why, it took on healing powers, they believed... The troubling was always brief—lasted just a few moments--but they believed that the first person into the water after it stirred got to soak up all that angelic, healing energy--none-left-over for anybody else—anybody who got in the pool too late was out of luck. You had your one chance to be the early bird—first come/first served…

Now, because that’s what people believed, the porticoes--the entrances to the pool--became kind of like a waiting room—like where you sit at the doctor’s office, reading last year’s magazines—all kinds of people with all kinds of ailments sitting around—people waiting, waiting--day after day--waiting their turn in the water… Nobody had scheduled appointments—you just showed up and hoped for the best… And John tells us there was this one guy—had an infirmity—might’ve been paralysis--some other debilitating condition—we don’t know his deal for sure--but what we do know is that here was somebody dealing with his affliction for, are you ready? **38 years**! Thirty-eight years of never beating out the competition—of never getting in on the cure—and so there he was—sitting by the pool--waiting, and waiting, and waiting some more... Can you imagine? I’ll tell you what--I can’t… I would’ve had him giving up long time before, because if waiting was an Olympic sport, this guy would’ve gotten a gold medal!

So, here’s my question: Was it hope or habit that kept him coming to the pool? I mean, by now, our 38-year waiter knows all the old-timers, right?—knows everybody who’s been coming ‘round--knows who needs what—knows who made it in last time—knows who the newbies are—catches himself running the odds on how quick-on-their-feet they might be—all kinds of strategizing there, poolside… From what few details we are given, it seems this man is pretty much alone in the world—got no family helping him to get in the pool--no friends (not like that other guy Jesus told about—the one whose friends took him up top of a house--broke a hole in the roof--lowered him down so he could get to Jesus?). No, this man is all-on-his-own, and “on-his-own” isn’t enough! To make matters even worse--the prevailing attitude in his day toward illness or infirmity was that it was God’s judgment that had disabled him—judgment for either his sin or the sin of his parents. He’s had that shame loaded on him--been abandoned by everybody in his life along the way--gotten cranky over the years, I’m guessing--driven people’s sympathy—their desire to help him--away (which is so understandable--that he might have an edge to him…). (Because) if you’ve ever been sick, right?—ever run up against that powerless feeling of being at the hands of some inscrutable fate—ever been up against all the red tape of trying to work on your healing in a system stacked against you—well, then maybe you can relate to people looking to magic water as their way out… You get to feeling like your illness defines you—feeling like you’re not sure anymore who you are without it—hard to hope anymore in a place like that…

So he’s there by the pool--thirty-eight years and counting--when the day finally comes--somebody he’s never even met before wanders by. It’s a stranger--a stranger who intuits that the man’s been lying here a long, long time. So the stranger cuts to the chase--no small talk—no ice breaker to get to know each other--just jumps right in--blurts it out: “Do you want to be made well?” Really? He asks him that? “Do I what? Are you kidding me? You think I like lying here all day every day--all these broken down people—you think I chose this life?”

I picture him talking to Jesus without ever taking his eyes off the water—not even for a second—because it might “trouble,” right?—so conditioned do we become by our burden that we look to false hope even when the real thing’s standing right in front of us! All kinds of ways this man may have been insulted by Jesus, here, but there was something in the stranger’s voice—something in his manner—something in…I’m-not-sure-what--meaning that rather than just blowing him off, the man by the pool starts throwing out explanations—starts explaining how he’s been coming here every day—explaining how the water’s supposed to work—explaining what the system is—explaining how he’s had nobody helping him out—that that’s why he’s still in this condition. “You know how people are, right?—always looking out for themselves—always pushing and shoving to get ahead; what chance have I got? The system’s rigged!” He’s just looking for a hand up—one he’s looked for a thousand times before. But in the back of his mind he’s wondering--maybe, just maybe—maybe the stranger will stick around ‘til the water stirs—give him one more shot…

But that’s not what happens. “Stand up,” Jesus says. “And that mat you’ve been laying on?— won’t be needing that anymore.” It is instantaneous healing—no dip in the pool--no further instructions--not even a touch of the Master’s hand. The healed man just walks away. But now the trouble starts--trouble because of the very last line of our text, this morning: “Now that day was a **Sabbath,**” verse nine says. Oops…

If you read the next nine verses of John chapter five, you’ll discover something so profoundly disturbing about what should’ve been one of the coolest moments in all the gospel. You see, no sooner had this man started walking (for the first time in **38 years**) when he ran into the Sabbath po-lice—the rules-keepers--these self-appointed guardians of law and order—the ones who’d taken a free life in God and turned it into something else—into this an endless list of do’s and don’ts (mostly don’ts!). Since the fourth commandment expressly forbids working on the Sabbath, they said, we will tell you what you can and can’t do on that day! But what’s work, exactly? Well, the commandment doesn’t spell that out--so to clarify (along with a thousand other fine points of interpreting the Ten Commandments), centuries of legal fine print accumulated—got collated into something called the **Mishna**—this companion volume to the Bible--39 categories of things considered Sabbath taboos—covered everything—from agriculture to hunting to mealtime--even chores—all in excruciating detail. You couldn’t tie or untie a knot on the Sabbath—couldn’t sew or tear out two stitches from a garment— couldn’t erase two letters of the alphabet— couldn’t even put out a fire (and on and on and on--ad nauseam…). They even covered the matter of carrying things—you weren’t supposed to carry anything on the Sabbath—which was a big mistake for this man--doing what Jesus told him—taking his mat--carrying it the wrong day of the week... Never mind 38 years of infirmity; never mind getting beaten to the punch thousands of times trying to get in the miracle water. You broke the rule. “But it’s not my fault!” he says. “Some guy just told me to go home--take my mat with me.” “What guy?” they asked. “I don’t know, just some guy--some stranger—somebody not from around here.”

So now the scene shifts. Jesus and the healed man meet again--this time at the Temple--and Jesus does not mince words: “You’ve been healed,” he says--“time to stop living in sin—time to start living in obedience.” In other words, you’ve been healed, now don’t waste it; get your life together. If you go back to your old ways you’ll be worse off than you were before…” For 38 years this man’s been in the grip of his struggle, but Jesus wants him to understand that now he can’t be using that struggle as either an excuse or an identity—his body’s been restored, don’t you see—and so now he’s gonna need an equally strong sprit—gonna need to start imagining a new life for himself. And right here is what we don’t like to hear, right? That being made well means we need to change? Don’t be telling me that, Jesus… It’s like being sent home from the doctor after surgery—given instructions to change our diet, change our exercise, change our attitude—that harsh truth that we now have a responsibility to take our healing and move forward. We say, “Well, isn’t there a drug I can take? Can’t I be given a way out of this thing—one that doesn’t require anything further from me? I mean, change? Really?” Jesus is telling him that a one-shot cure won’t last forever—telling him his future health is going to depend on the choices he makes. .. That’s right. It’s what the ***Serenity Prayer*** understands so deeply about us: *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.* In other words—God, there’s this part only you can do. If I try to do your part I will screw it up. Every single time. And then there’s this part that’s mine to do. And if I don’t do the part that’s mine to do, it will also get screwed up. Every single time. So give me the wisdom to know what part is yours, God, and what part is mine, and the courage to do what is mine to do…

So, here we are—our lives like this man’s life, if we’re honest… Because as it turned out, a story that should’ve been one of the all-time great moments in the Bible ended up being one of the saddest. For we read that when he heard Jesus’ challenge to a new way of life, this man chose instead to turn away—to run off on his newly restored legs and turn his healer in, to the rules-keepers. It would mean that Jesus--the one who so wisely understood that living by the rules is not the same thing as living by the truth—Jesus would find his life in danger from this day forward—a danger that would one day culminate in the cross. So, a sad story indeed…[[1]](#footnote-1)

I sometimes think the place God most wants to meet us is that place just beyond where the sidewalk ends—beyond the place where every next step is clear, and sure, and safe... If you’ve ever read C.S. Lewis’ ***The Chronicles of Narnia****,* you might remember the moment when Aslan, the lion—this magnificent lion representing Jesus—Aslan has returned from death—and it’s the moment in the story when Lucy and the other children first recognize him. Lucy’s all jumping up and down--clapping her hands--astonished--and Aslan says, “Oh, children, I can feel my strength coming back—oh children, catch me if you can!” Which is where we pick up the story:

*Aslan stood for a second, his eyes all bright, limbs quivering, lashing himself with his tail. Then he made a leap--high over their heads--landed on the other side of the table. Laughing--though she didn't know why--Lucy scrambled over it to reach him. Aslan leaped again. A mad chase began. Round and round the hill-top he led them--now hopelessly out of their reach--now letting them almost catch his tail--now diving between them--now tossing them in the air with his huge, beautifully velveted paws, and catching them again--and now (finally) stopping—unexpectedly--so that all three of them rolled over together in a happy laughing heap of fur and arms and legs… It was a romp like nobody’s ever had except in Narnia; and whether it was more like playing with a thunderstorm or playing with a kitten, Lucy never could make up her mind. But the funny thing was, that when all three finally lay together panting in the sun, the girls no longer felt the least bit tired, or hungry, or thirsty...[[2]](#footnote-2)*

You don’t suppose the life God invites us to could be like that, do you? When we decide to give up living a life of excuses, or when we decide to quit letting our possessions possess us, or when we decide to stop keeping secrets in our relationships—when we decide to live a life of openness and with a willingness to live into a future?—one that gives the healing God has done in us integrity and staying power—could that be what God has in mind?

1. I am indebted to Virginia Stem Owens’ *Looking for Jesus* for her understanding of this passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1950), pp. 160-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)