

## March 22<sup>nd</sup> message

If our reading from John is unfamiliar to you don't feel like you're all alone. This passage from John has been left out of the Revised Common Lectionary. I first learned about the (RCL) when I took classes in the lay ministry some 25 years ago. The Revised Common Lectionary is a way to organize different readings from the Bible in a three year cycle following the liturgical year. The idea was to create a unified approach to scripture readings among different Christian denominations. Most mainline church pastors follow it. It is a way to encourage ministers to study parts of the bible they would not normally preach on. This Lenten season there have been a few readings from John included in the lectionary. I noticed how the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of John had been left out, so I thought why not.

When I lived in Ames, Iowa attending the school there, I lived near a church called Bethesda. I knew it had a biblical name and here it is in our scripture for today. In this chapter Jesus appears to be on His own wanting to attend "The Feast of the Jews." John makes it a point to show how Jesus always followed Jewish traditions. Jesus comes to what is described as a sheep gate with a pool with five porticoes or five covered porches. The name Bethesda means a "place of outpouring" or a "house of kindness, grace and mercy, so as one can see that is a good name for a church.

It was interesting to read how for many centuries Biblical scholars questioned if this pool had ever existed, because archaeologists hadn't found any sign of it. But in the nineteenth century, an area was discovered that appeared to have been a pool. Many were hopeful that this be the one described in John chapter five. Yet it wasn't until 1964 that it was firmly established that the pool had been found.

In the Bible study series by Barclay, he states how beneath this pool was a subterranean stream which bubbled up once in a while and disturbed the waters. Tradition believed it was caused by an angel and the first person to get into the pool after this would be healed. We might laugh at such reasoning but people hoped to be healed from this water. People at this time had more of a reverence

for water than we do. In this area of the world water was/is scarce and there was a sense of holiness in such a place where mystery surrounded these occasional occurrences.

We have our superstitions also. Last Friday was a Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, chances are we noted that. We are careful not to walk under a ladder propped up against a building or knock on wood or our heads after saying something. The belief in the groom not seeing his bride on their wedding day until she walks down the aisle goes back to the days of arranged marriages. The belief was is the groom saw her before that moment he might consider her ugly and call off the wedding.

As Jesus walked there someone may have pointed out how this man's chances of being healed were non-existent. John includes how he has been there was 38 years. The man states how there would be no way with his disability that he could be first in the pool after it bubbled. He may or may not have heard of Jesus. His hope was in the pool, rather than on Jesus, the Messiah. This does not stop Jesus from healing him right then and there with the simple command, "Get up and walk." The man is healed and goes about his way. The story could end there but more on that later. Let's consider for a few moments what else could have happened.

The man despite his condition could have resigned himself to his plight. After all, he was used to the way things were for him. He had a slight hope that he might be cured if he could somehow get in the water after it gurgled.

While that may seem like a foolish option to us, there is something for all of us to learn: We too, need the healing Jesus offers in some way or another. We may not have the need for physical healing as this man did, but we all have some disability. It may be a mindset that just shuts certain new possibilities and solutions out. It may be a prejudice that we really have never fully examined. It may be an emotional pull on us that keeps us from expanding our full potential. Or it may be a grudge we hold against a person or group because of something that has happened.

I can get discouraged pretty easily and I don't think I'm alone. Sometimes I look at all is going on in our state, country, and world and I think what's the use in hoping things will get better. Many people don't even watch national news anymore because of the state of current events. I read this week how a Pew Research report found Americans are not following the news as closely as they had been in the past. Although their most recent survey was conducted in August 2022 it does show a trend. It reported 38% of U.S. adults followed the news "most or all of the time". The same survey from March 2016 reported the figure was 51%.

Yes, this is only one survey but I do hear the same thing in conversations I have. This can have a direct effect on one's prayer life. We can be tempted to think 'what is the use of praying for the Lord's intervention when things seem so far gone?' This reading reminds us that our beliefs in what God can do are too limited. We can look for a fulfilled, abundant life in other places. We are tempted to chase the false gods of money, popularity and celebrity, pleasure, and gratification, and indulgence.

This gospel reading tells how Jesus went out of His way to minister and heal a man who could have accepted his fate. Jesus wants to do the same for our world today. Sometimes we don't realize our own helplessness and how we need the healing of our Lord in many aspects of our lives today. What Jesus offers is much more than a physical healing. Jesus is offering a healing of our spirits, recommitment to faith and hope in Him. In addition to that, there is more to learn.

So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.' " They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this

was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working. This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

What should have been recognized as a great event in the life of this man was met with scorn. The Pharisees by this time had determined that carrying a bedroll or pallet was work: therefore it broke one of their Sabbath rules. I say “one of their Sabbath rules” because it was what they had come up with after centuries of debate. Essentially they did not care if he had been healed and was on his way to a new and better life. They cared more about their interpretations of the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment.

Again there is something for us to learn from this. While God commands rest on the Sabbath Day, God continues to do good. What Jesus did was an act God’s grace. This threatened the Jewish leaders and their rules and regulations.

This is the challenge for us. Maybe we don’t realize how we have some unspoken rules that don’t allow us to see how more of the grace of God can work in our lives and others. We can be tempted to be content with our lives the way there are even though there is so much more that God wants to develop.

What this man received from Jesus can be described in one word: wholeness. This passage then teaches us how this restored unity with God is available to all. Do we want to be healed? Do we want the wholeness available through Christ? That is the question we all must answer. Amen.