

5-25-25 Sermon” No One to Put Me into the Pool” – John 5:1-13

I have a soft spot in my heart for the man by the Pool of Bethesda.

Life has not been kind to this man.

The text never actually tells us what his ailment is, only that he has been waiting 38 years for healing. He sets himself up by the Pool of Bethesda because according to local legend, the pool has healing powers. As the story goes, from time to time an angel would come down from heaven and stir up the waters, and whoever was the first to step into the pool after the water had been troubled would be healed. But no one knew when the angel would come, so people set up camp in the porticoes to wait.

Jesus sees all these people, but he is drawn this particular man. He asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” And: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred; someone else always gets there first.” Jesus tells him to stand up, take his mat, and walk. And the man by the pool is healed.

Biblical scholars have not been kind to this man. They portray him as one of the least likable people that Jesus heals. They call him ornery and stubborn. They accuse him of learned helplessness. They say that he has been ill so long that he has forgotten why he is lying there by the Pool of Bethesda, that he has given up on the possibility of being made well.

Some commentators point to the man’s lack of faith. And they’re right: Many of Jesus’ miracles begin with the sick person’s belief in Jesus’ power to make them well. There’s the woman with the flow of blood who just wants to touch the hem of Jesus’ cloak, or the Roman centurion who tells Jesus, “I am not worthy for you to come to my house; only say the word, and I believe that my servant will be healed.”

The man by the Pool of Bethesda doesn’t even know who Jesus is. When Jesus asks him if he wants to be made well, he responds not with a resounding “yes!” but with a description of his predicament. He does appear to have given up on hope, on healing, on the possibility that things could ever be different from the way they are now.

Others point to the man’s apparent lack of gratitude. He says nothing to Jesus after his miraculous healing – no “thank you,” no “Wow, that was cool!” – he doesn’t even ask his name. And when the temple authorities confront him for carrying his mat on the sabbath, he has no trouble throwing this Jesus-whose-name-he-doesn’t-know under the bus. “Don’t look at me! The guy who healed me told me to pick up my mat and walk, so I did! And did I mention this guy was *healing* on the sabbath? That must be worse than carrying a mat!”

So yes – the man by the pool has neither faith nor gratitude, and friends, that is precisely why I love him. Because these days, I too am often running low on the capacity for faith or gratitude. There are days when, if Jesus asked *me* ‘do you want to be made well?’, I fear I would answer, “Well, that’s sweet of you, Jesus, but what difference would that make?” Or days I might be a bit of a smart alec, look at him and say, “Ok, Jesus, good luck with that!” *[Smile]* Maybe you have days like that, too.

So yes, the man by the Pool of Bethesda is ungrateful and unfaithful, and so am I. And you know what?/ Jesus doesn’t care. He heals the man anyway.

What Jesus offers this man – what Jesus offers *us*, more often than not – is God’s utterly unprovoked grace. Grace that requires no faith on our part, grace that comes whether or not we respond appropriately. Grace that is entirely dependent on who God is and how much God loves. And there’s not a thing under heaven we can do about it.

There's another reason I have a soft spot for the man by the Pool of Bethesda. It's his *honesty*.

We are quick to judge the man's response when Jesus asks, "Do you want to be made well?" He says, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool," and we say, *Well, he's so focused on the problem that he's forgotten about the solution*, but...what if we're wrong? What if the man by the pool is not wallowing in self-pity, but is rather telling us the truth of his predicament? What if he in fact *is* answering Jesus' question, it's just not the answer we expect to hear?

The man's illness is a problem, but it's one that can be solved; there is healing in the water just a few yards away. Maybe the problem is not his illness, but his isolation. He is stranded, not because he has no access to healing, but because he has no community.

We can compare this man to another paralytic, one we meet in Mark's Gospel. Mark's paralytic comes to Jesus for healing, but the line is too long, he's stuck outside the house. But that man has four friends who devise a plan. They drag him up on top of the house, dig through the roof, and lay their friend right at Jesus' feet. The paralytic is healed, and even Jesus is amazed at the faith of his community.

The man by the Pool of Bethesda has none of that. And that's the first thing he tells Jesus, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool."

Generations of readers have assumed this answer to be a non-sequitur. But what if the man is telling Jesus what the real problem is?

"Of course I want to be made well, Jesus, but even if I were healed right this moment, I would still be alone. I have lost my connection, my community. After 38 years of illness, of being considered ritually unclean, I have no one left. So I decided my best chance at survival was here by the pool, alongside others who have been cast out. This is it for me; this is where my story ends."

Into this man's isolation, Jesus speaks words of unprovoked grace. Jesus sees the suffering man, and he *speaks to him*.

And his words are a balm to the man by the pool. Who knows how many years it has been since another human being has looked this man in the eye and spoken to him. After 38 years alone by the pool, has given up on the possibility that someone else might join him there.

Jesus restores the man to health, but perhaps more importantly, he also restores the man to *community*.

As many of you know, I used to live in Peru. And while I was there, I heard another reading of this story, one that comes from liberation theology.

On the first day of our in-country volunteer orientation, my Peruvian host-dad Eduardo read us this story. And then he closed his Bible, looked up at us, and said, "There is another way this story could have ended. Maybe a better one."

"The people by the pool kept climbing over one another, trying to be the one who got to the waters first and received healing. Some days they won, some days they lost; but each time, only one person was healed."

"But what if," Eduardo asked, "They were approaching the pool the wrong way? What if, the next time the angel stirred the waters, they decided *not* to start the mad dash to the pool? What if, instead, they helped one another up – leaned on each other, held onto one another – and formed a circle around the pool? What if they all approached the waters together, as a community, and stepped in at the same time? Then, they would all be healed."

“John 5 is the story of one man’s healing. But,” said Eduardo, “the Gospel is a story in which all of us are healed. We are called to proclaim, and enact, and live a story in which we all stand up, take up our mats, and walk away.”

Friends, may we live a Gospel like that. When we hear this man’s lament, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool,” may we be the ones who say, “Here, take my hand. Let me help you up.” Amen.