

Sermon for St. John the Baptist, May 1, 2016; by Rev. John Perry

The man Jesus healed at the Sheep Gate

This sermon tells the story of today's Gospel from the perspective of the person whom Jesus healed; this is the Gospel passage:

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 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?' 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.' Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath. (John 5:1-9)

I am the man whom Jesus healed at the pool by the Sheep Gate. I want to tell my story.

This pool was just outside the city walls of Jerusalem. It was near the road that ran up to the Sheep Gate. We were outside the gate, because if you didn't live in the city or have business there, they pretty much did not let you in. So a lot of us, the ones they had no use for, would hang out by the side of the road, and beg as people went by. We usually got enough to survive on, but just barely. Some of us who begged were tenant farmers whose crops had failed. Others were blind or lame.

Me, I had a bad leg. I got hurt a long time ago, when a stone wall fell in on me. I never walked right again, I use a crutch to hobble around. I had sharecropped a small patch of land. Couldn't do that any more, so the landowner threw me off his land. I lost just about everything. Figured God had it in for me. My older brother had gotten the little farm that was in our family; he and his wife let me stay with them afterwards. I did at first, but I hated being beholden. I'd rather beg. So I headed off down the road with my crutch and my mat.

We would camp outside Jerusalem, off the road a ways. In the morning we'd sit by the road while it was busy, beg what we could. When things quieted down, me and the others who were sick or lame, we'd go over to the pool. It had these long covered walkways around it, and we'd sit or lie down around the columns. I'd bring my mat, claim a little space for myself, lie down and wait. Look at the water, and wait.

The waters could heal, you know. I'd seen it happen. Not often, mind you. And you had to catch it just the right time. What you had to do, if you wanted to be healed, was be the first one in the water when it started moving. Every now and then it kind of swirled around. Some said it was angels, stirring up the water; maybe it was a hidden spring, I don't know. You just had to get in, right then.

I could never move fast enough. With this bum leg, trying to hobble down on my crutch, and there were stairs you had to get down – most everybody scrambled on past me, every time. Those others had someone to help them: family, friends. Not me. Had nobody. Didn't really need nobody, neither – except for getting down in the water. It got me angry sometimes, seeing those others scooting around me all the time. I felt like sticking my crutch out and tripping them. Yeah, I was alone. All those years.

One day, there I am lying by the pool. And along comes this guy. I saw him coming, walking along the porticoes. Looking at all of us. Not just a quick once-over, but really looking. There was something about him. Something still, and calm. Like he knew things. Made it hard to meet his eyes, like you didn't want him to look too closely at you. But there was also a kindness about him. It was like he could see into you, he knew what was going on inside, but he wasn't going to judge you.

He stopped and looked at me. Didn't say a word, at first. He just looked. I could see he knew I'd been lame a long time. I think he also knew what I had let this do to me; how I had become stubborn, closed in and all. Because he asked me something very strange, very ... precise. Looking straight at me, he said, "Do you want to be made well?"

What a question! It seemed to be about something more than just my bum leg. Did I want to be made well – like, all of me? I didn't really want to answer that. So I tilted my head toward the water and said, "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." That's all that mattered to me. He knew I wasn't really answering his question. But the heck with him. I just wanted someone to get me in the water. And then leave me the heck alone.

Do you have any idea how hard it is, to admit you need someone's help? Then if you get it, you just want them to go away. Leave you alone. So you can still harbor a grievance if you want to; whatever resentment or grudge you hold against the world.

Who wants to be made well, of that? Really?

That's why I said to him, "I have no one to put me in the pool; someone always steps down ahead of me." I was alone; and someone else always got what I wanted. Period; end of story. I guess the picture I was showing him of myself, was not very pretty. But still, for all that he saw me, and saw everything, I guess, with such clarity – still, he didn't judge me. The answer I'd given him, small and bitter though it was, did not stop him. Because he then told me, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

With this, he forgave me for who I was not. "Stand up, take your mat and walk." He said it kindly, but firmly. How often does it happen, that someone forgives you, for who you are not?

This kind of forgiveness, changes you. Those things you've held on to, those grudges and resentments, that smallness – you now see they were like forces that had been working on you. And this man, with his clarity and understanding, with his forgiveness – he was more powerful than they were.

“Stand up, take your mat and walk.” You now have a choice, he was saying. You can now lay those things aside, that old way of seeing yourself and the world. You can instead, walk now. That’s the power he has; that’s the power, of his forgiveness.

It is the very power of God. Working inside, to heal.

So I did not have to live, the way I had been. Yes, I could walk again, he was saying; walk well. An amazing thing. And even more, I could restore my relationships, be part of my family again, be part of the world. God’s world. This is what he could do, with me.

All of us, who are sick, or lame, or blind. In one way or another. He offers this healing to us; this wellness. As he offered it, to me.

I chose to accept his offer. I took up my mat, and began to walk.