

John 5:1-9

word count: 2,546

This story from the Gospel of John was read here in church a few weeks ago on the Sunday that our Israel church group gathered around the very same pool at Beth-zada. We were asked to open our bibles to John 5, and we read the story of the man who waited by this same pool for an angel to trouble the waters so that he could be made whole.

“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.”

Beth-zada, or “Bethesda,” means “house of mercy.” Today, it is a ruin—the pool and the remnants of the five porticos around it are far down where they have been excavated with the rising mounds of civilization piling higher with each passing century since the legend began whereby a lone angel flew over it to trouble the waters and heal one individual waiting therein.

<http://www.bible-history.com/sketches/ancient/jeru-pool-bethesda.jpg>

As you see it now, it does not look like a place that could host much healing. Stone is overturned upon stone, and persistent, dry vegetation competes to take the healing pool back to the earth. Parts of one wall are now too dangerous for tourists, and are roped off.

<http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/Bethesda%5B1%5D.jpg>

According to one Christian tradition, Mary was born in a cave across from the pool at Beth-zada where her son Jesus would one day heal the man who was sick for thirty-eight years. The Crusaders believed that a grotto they discovered next to the ruins was Mary’s birthplace and the home of her parents Anne and Joachim. They incorporated the cave into a powerfully impressive church named for Mary’s mother, Anne. □ After the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem, Saladin saved the 12th century church and converted it into an Islamic seminary, where to this day his name is carved over the door in Arabic.

Today, St. Anne’s belongs to the French and is run by an order of the Catholic Church. □ It is simple and stark, but what is truly remarkable about it are the acoustics. Every day, groups of tourists are brought to the small sanctuary and are led by their guide in the singing of a simple hymn, or else a visiting choir comes by to sing for the pilgrims inside. Whatever the music that is being lifted up, it stays in the room; reverberating against the walls and ceiling long after the last note is sung. It is as if the human voice only begins the singing, and the Spirit takes it, lifts it high, and finishes the notes that were begun.

From the pool at Beth-zada, we could hear the music—one hymn after another moving out and over the pool where an angel once troubled the water. We followed the music, and it stopped. Our guide explained the history of the church on the front steps. A group filed out of the church, and another filed in. Inside, a man I recognized as having sat with us on the plane turned and shook our hands. The group he was with became silent, and their eighty-year old leader who has brought over a hundred tour groups with more scheduled, lifted his arms, and his congregation sang, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.” He brought his arms down to silence them. The word, “sound” wound through the stone arches and surrounded and held us. “I once was lost, but now am found,” the word met its meaning and found us, encircled us, called us to look upward to where it still hung in the air.

The group left, and it was our turn. “Do you all know, ‘How Great Thou Art’?” our guide asked. Cynthia; pastor Mark’s wife, church secretary and talented singer, stood and helped us to wade through the words, ending, “Then we will sing your praise forever more; □ How great Thou Art, How great Thou Art!” ‘Art’ was created, lifted and descended in Spirit-led harmony until it

became memory. We stayed in the room as long as we could—listening to next group that took our place, watching the priests and nuns in pure white come and go. The sign in the church read, “Open for prayers and hymns. NO explanations inside the basilica.” Nothing could be explained. It was a place for experience only.

Back in the sunshine and the heat, it was easy to see how the pool at Beth-zada would have been cool and welcome, here in the distant part of the city near the sheep’s gate.

We hear in today’s passage that Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast. Now, you would expect that he would go to the temple for this feast. But rather, he is out at the border of the city at the sheep gate. It is a place where the sacrificial lambs and sheep are kept until they are offered up, and a place for those who are so desperate to be healed that they cling to a legend of healing waters that are troubled by an angel. At the first moment that the waters bubble up, they wade into the water to believing that they can become whole.

In fact, the spiritual, “Wade in the Water,” is based on this passage where one person can make it when others cannot, along with a hidden code that helped runaway slaves to believe that they could escape to wholeness and freedom in Canada.

Dr. James Forbes, formerly of Riverside Church, once talked about the unfairness in this passage: (*next three paragraphs are a rough reconstruction*) First, when the angel troubles the waters, only one person, the first one in, gets to be healed. Here is a man who has been denied access to health care. Second, he has been sick for thirty-eight years. Clearly, he has pre-existing conditions. He says to Jesus, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going down, another steps down before me.” Now here is a man who cannot help himself; here are some self-esteem issues. The paralyzed man had been sick for thirty-eight years and had been at the pool long enough to become a fixture there. From all indications, his expectation to be healed has been changed to an acceptance of his condition as a permanent debilitation. He had lost hope that things could be better. Get up, Jesus tells him.

I think the most important question in the passage from *John* is the one that Jesus asks. The first words out of Jesus’ mouth are, “Do you want to be healed?” I like the King James Version here, because it says, “Do you want to be made *whole*?” This is not just a question for the people on the five porticoes. This is a physical, mental and spiritual health question for me and for you, for our nation, as well as (most recently) for the nation wherein these words were first spoken. “Do you want to be made whole?”¹

Well, I can speak for myself. I want to be made whole. I come here and to other places where the harmony of wholeness hang in the air, and I ponder my relationship to all the mystery, silence, thought, hope, future, love and friendship that I can sing out under one vaulted dome of creation called, God, and the part I play in that relationship to creation through each of you. The music that is left behind when the last note is sung is, in the end, all that matters.

Where have the “hurts” been, where does there need to be forgiveness where there is now a note of discord, who needs to step in and say, or even sing if need be, the note that brings full harmony? How can we continue to work as a whole so that can happen? Because, see...I want to be a *whole* person with wholeness in the role I play. And I ask you if *you* want to be whole, too. What is it that keeps you from being whole? Is there sufficient humanity in you that recognizes when you are constricted, segmented, torn apart, not functioning at the level you need to, cut off from the normal flow of your daily life? Somehow, somewhere, like most of you, (I suspect) I attracted to myself the strong desire to be everything I can be, and I don’t always do it well, but I know that it is *essential* to my wholeness.

That’s one of the things that brought me to be a part of this community—this is a high-functioning, high-community, high-thinking, high-loving— low church tradition in the best sense of the word. We need to keep ourselves whole. Can I get an “Amen”?

If a toad was the last thing that popped out of your mouth, you're going to be remembered as a discordant croak—but you will be forgiven, if you ask—and you want to be whole.

If you are under financial pressures from work or lack thereof, if you see yourself endlessly running on the same wheel and it causes you to turn inward, focus your anger on the people who love you, cause you to see your self-worth in being addicted to staying put in the rat-race, don't forget the wise words of Walter Brueggemann, who said: 'Even if you think you are winning in the rat race, that still makes you a rat.'

If your health is an issue, and the kind of wholeness you are seeking keeps eluding you, then look for wholeness in a community that ultimately, will be there, even when we mess up and need *your* forgiveness.

No one here has to bring only half of themselves to this place. We want you as you are, and that is as a whole person without restricting the naturalness of your being. In order to be whole, no one should have to quarantine who they are in order to make someone else feel more comfortable.

Do you come here today as a whole person? Do you want to be made whole? If you're old, you have to be whole. If you're young, you have to be whole. If you're an Israeli or a Palestinian, you have to be whole. Anything that chops us up and says "this part of you Jesus would accept, and this part he wouldn't" has to be referred to the idea that if there is something God has to work on, that's God's business and beyond our understanding.

Now I want to pause here a moment and ask you the question again, and this time I want you to answer me. Is there anyone here who wants to be made whole? Is there anyone here who wants to move forward in the full possibilities of your life? Anyone here who has felt bound up, constricted, moving in slow motion? This is where we begin to work in the spirit to place that healing balm on each other.

A visitor once said to me, "I'm so glad you don't have that 'passing of the peace' here. I don't come to church to hug a bunch of strangers." Just for that, and just for today, I'm going to ask you to do something now, don't worry, it won't be hard, and if you're shy, you can do it quietly, and no one has to do it at all. Just reach out right now, and touch the person near you. You can hug them, but just don't lay hands on anyone who doesn't want it. Go ahead, and don't worry—the lady who doesn't like to hug people hasn't come back, but I hope she does.

All right. You released something. What got released? Jesus did something very important in asking, "Do you want to be made whole?" The man made an excuse. He thought of reasons for why he was bound from becoming what he needed to be. What Jesus did was to provoke the disclosure in this man's life of what it was that was preventing him from being what he needed to be. Some of the people at Beth-zada had no idea of what the impediment was. They didn't know that they were living with the idea that they are bound to live their lives within the restrictions of the thought and being that they are used to, that they can't be more generous, and that they are who they are because they've always been that way. They live in the physical, the emotional, and spiritual quarantines they have placed around themselves because they have listened to that voice within them that says, "I *can't* be more, I *can't* expect my life to change, I *can't* do anything I set my mind to."

One day, we broke from our tour to hear from Palestinian and Israeli Christians about the experience of separation and hatred in the Holy Land. When our bus into Palestinian territory mysteriously failed to show up, we were on our own. Linda and I followed Carl's pilgrimage—the thing he wanted most to do was to revisit the Church of St. Anne. We followed the Via Dolorosa, the streets that mark Jesus' last journey carrying his cross, which is today lined by stalls offering olivewood tsatskes, postcards, nuts, beer, luggage and snow globes of the Garden of Gethsemane.

We found the Pool at Beth-zada and the Church of St. Anne. People were scattered here and there, sitting in silence. Slowly, from his seat behind Linda and I, Carl began to sing, "Panis

Angelicus.” After every phrase, the last note lingered in the air. People began to look around to see where the singer was, and when they found finally found him sitting in the midst of us, they smiled. The last note hung in the air...then faded. Our words, our actions, our lives...hang in the air in the mystery and the music that is creation. What is the “sound” of your life that reverberates after you have left the room?

What is it that keeps you from being whole in harmony with a sphere that is in need of your particular music? Do you hear the voice that makes excuses and keeps you from going down to that pool and becoming whole? Is it about employment, marriage, loneliness...your self perception?

But the question on Jesus’ lips is “Do you *want* to be made whole?” Because, if you say yes to it, then you will have it. Maybe that’s the scary part—knowing that no matter the pressures of these ongoing and difficult times we can actually be a part of a world, community and family that helps us realize the best in each of us. Perhaps when we open up our lives to be really present to each other and to those whom we have not yet met, and ask “How can I help?” Maybe we will see that man, sick for thirty-eight years, looking into our own eyes, and its just possible we will know our wholeness in our interrelationship with those who need that healing balm that we have through God-in-us. Can we be whole? Do we want to be whole? Can I hear an “Amen”?

This is an open table....

Sermon Reources

1. With the help of my notes on hearing Dr. Forbes speak on this passage, and this site: <http://topicfire.com/Victimocracy-Everyone-s-a-Victim-of-Everyone-Else-14070642.html> I was able to partially reconstruct (as best as I could) Dr. Forbes words about “the unfairness” in this passage from John 5.

A tourist group sings in St. Anne’s Church, conducted by their tour leader, “Ruthi.”
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMBjJGg6_R4&feature=related

Masters College Chorale stops in on visitors to St. Anne’s Church, Jerusalem.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfI3n8zQM08&feature=related>

Choir of London rehearses Taverner’s, “Hymn to the Mother of God.”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5GWgb18yzjE&feature=related>

People singing the “Alleluia” we sing at IUCC.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TsqN3tuaQ4&feature=related>

John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew, Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. 3 In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water; 4 for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and troubled the water; whoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatever disease he had. 5 One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6 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?’ 7 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.’ 8 Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ 9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.