

Sermon on John 5:1-16  
CCRC, 26 January 2025  
Rev. Tom Bomhof  
"The Kindest of Strangers"

Dear Friends of God,

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Certainly Jesus looks for faith in the people he heals. Our story this morning comes right after the healing of the Centurion's son. Faith was all over that story in many different forms. In Luke 18 the persistent widow has so much faith in Jesus she pesters him and pesters him until he heals her son. Jesus told blind Bartimaeus "Your eyes are healed because of your faith." And then there is the story about Jesus's hometown of Nazareth, where Jesus either could not or would not do any miracles in his hometown because of their lack of faith. So many times the Bible takes pains to recognize the faith of the one being healed as instrumental in the process.

The healing Jesus does at the Pool of Bethesda is wildly different than that. There is no faith involved here. One pastor puts it this way:

If ever we are tempted to think that God's healing depends on the quality or quantity of a person's faith, this passage offers a strong corrective. The man whom Jesus heals shows no sign of faith in Jesus or of gratitude for what Jesus has done for him.

Elisabeth Johnson

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Jesus had come to Jerusalem and had gone to the place where the people with disabilities gathered. There was a local superstition that when the water mysteriously stirred in the pool it was an angel of the Lord and the first one in the pool got healed. So there they sat, eyes carefully monitoring the surface of the pool, poised to leap at the first sign of stirring. Eager hope. Families were involved, assistants were at hand, places were chosen. I wonder what it felt like to have that sense of competition among those folks, each vying to be the first one in. It was buzzing with sad competition. So much was on offer and it was up to them to jump in and get it.

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Jesus noticed this one man out of all of them. He didn't come there as a bold brash miracle worker. He didn't come in there and announce that everyone gets healed today. Sort of like Oprah who always gave everyone in the audience a gift. She once gave everyone in the audience a car, thinking that access to a vehicle could change a person's life. 276 brand-new Pontiac G-6 sedans for everyone. How wildly and publicly generous!

Jesus focused on this one man among many. He heard his story. He approached him in private. He didn't proclaim anything. He asked a simple yet startling question:

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Do you want to get well?

What kind of question is this anyway? The man at the pool obviously is there because he wants to get well. Why else would he be there?

But what if he said no? What if he looked into Jesus eyes and said, "No, thank you, sir." I like my paralysis. I've had it for 38 years and it's familiar to me. It's all I know, it's part of who I am and I don't think I want that to change. Besides, who are you anyway? Obviously this man had no idea of who this stranger was, nor how people traveled for days to get to him and ask for healing.

The man gives an answer you would give to a stranger who may or may not be able to help him:

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"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

We assume this means yes. We assume he means to say, "Yes, I want to be healed, but I cannot. I've tried, I've done everything I know how to do. I want to get into that water, I want to be healed, but I lack the ability." But why didn't he just say, "Yes"? Yes, that is what I want more than anything else. That is why I am here. I want to get well. Instead, he says he is unable to get to the water when it stirs up because there is no one to help me. Maybe he saw this stranger as just that person to help him get into the water. Hey stranger, you're just the strong, healthy young man I need to get to the pool today.

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What we hear in his response is that he is alone and hopeless. I've no one to help me. I've given up. I have no hope of ever winning that desperate race to the pool. I will never get well. 38 years of watching all those young whippersnappers beat him to the pool. 38 years and no express pass for him. 38 years and no one to assist him. 38 years of hopes dashed. This man has become passive. He didn't ask Jesus for anything. And when Jesus asked to help he didn't answer his question directly. He didn't even ask this stranger who he was, nor did he want to know anything about his power to do what he was offering. The man seemed to be looking for a special stirring of God in the stirring of the water. No part of him was expecting it in the face of this stranger.

And yet, there is Jesus, ready to heal. In Chapter 4, Jesus identified himself to the Samaritan woman at the well as the Living Water. Now he identifies himself further as the Living Water who can heal. Don't look to that pool. Look to me.

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Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."

The result was immediate:

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At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked

But what happens next is kind of strange. In other healings there is also a response of gratitude. In Sunday School we learned the song about the man who went jumping and leaping

and praising God. At least one leper came back to thank Jesus and we love him for that. Formerly blind Bartimaeus followed Jesus down the road.

Yet this man continues in his morose, obtuse ways. He didn't say thank you. He didn't even bother to learn Jesus' name. Do you know the name of the surgeon who performed the life-saving surgery on you? Do you know the name of the guy who rescued you? This week we heard the story of the Olympic kite surfer from Brazil who rescued a young woman caught in a riptide and just a few minutes away from drowning. That woman is going to remember the name of Bruno Lobo every day of her life. On social media she expressed her thanks: "Words can't describe my gratitude." There are people who search long and hard for the person who administered CPR on them before the ambulance arrived and save their life. They go on social media, put ads in the paper, and do research, all in hopes of being able to say thank you to their rescuer.

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Yes, Jesus had slipped through the crowds and intentionally absented himself from the scene, but the man could have called out, "What's your name?" He could have grabbed one of the disciples and found out who it was that healed him. Who is this man?

And incredibly it is Jesus who took the initiative in finding the man, and not vice versa. He found him in the Temple courts, and said to him,

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See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.

The "sin" that Jesus refers to is the sin of unbelief. He isn't referring to a sin that caused his illness, nor the sin of violating the sabbath. If the man persists in his unbelief and indifference to Jesus, he risks incurring the judgment of God, which matters far more than that of the religious authorities. Jesus is looking for faith in this man—stop holding back from believing in me. But we don't hear of any faith in this man by the end of the.

It seems all this man could think of is how to stop being harassed by the Religious Police because he was carrying his mat on the sabbath. He has the audacity to blame his violation of the Sabbath on his benefactor—as soon as he learns Jesus' name, he reports him to the Jewish authorities who start to harass Jesus. Perhaps the man thinks that if the authorities go after Jesus, they will leave him alone.

What an odd story. Why does Jesus heal a random person who doesn't ask for it, doesn't understand who he is, doesn't even bother to learn his name, doesn't even thank him, and gets Jesus into trouble? This man is galling, irksome, thick, annoying, dull, dense, nettlesome, obtuse.

The biggest issue is his inability to respond to Jesus with faith.

Neither the narrator's explanation that there was a crowd there (5:13) nor the man's report that Jesus made him "whole" is sufficient to offset the impression that the lame

man represents those whom even the signs cannot lead to authentic faith. Later Jesus explains: "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves" (14:11). The lame man could not.

R. Alan Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel

This is not a faith healing by any stretch of the imagination.

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So why did Jesus do it? What is this sign trying to point to?

This is a miracle of grace. This is a miracle that gives a picture of God in relationship with sinful human beings. How like us humans to treat the divine Son of God like this! And yet how marvelous that God treats us like he treats the lame man.

Jesus does it because it is the right thing to do. He does it because it reveals something that he wants to reveal about his mission to the world. This is what his Father is about so this is what he is about. Paul says it so well when he writes,

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Romans 5:6-10

By sheer grace God has come to us and heal us through the grace of Jesus Christ. We didn't deserve it, ask for it. We were lifeless to God; strangers to him. Indeed, we were enemies of God. And he rescued us anyway.

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Part of me thinks that Jesus could have made a better choice of people to heal at that pool that day. That ungrateful, dense man! Yet here we see the compassionate heart of Jesus given to those who don't deserve it. He didn't wait until his faith was strong enough or even present. Nor did he reserve it for those who respond by believing and following Jesus. Jesus' miracle shows that God didn't wait until we had cleaned ourselves up, stopped our sinning, even believed him before he stepped in to save us. His heart is able to bear up our hardness, our lifelessness to him, our chronic inability to recognize his presence. His heart is able to meet us in our need and to bless us on our way. As Elisabeth Johnson points out, here Jesus heals one whose lack of faith leads him to cooperate with those who persecute Jesus, who even seek to kill Jesus (John 5:18).

It is so appropriate that all this took place at a pool named Bethesda. The Hebrew word *Beth hesda* means “house of mercy” or “house of grace.” How fitting that Jesus performs a miracle of grace in the place of grace.

It is still a mystery to us why certain people are healed and others are not. And John’s gospel doesn’t give us an answer. But this sign points us to the only foundation for any healing—spiritual, physical, emotional, behavioural—God’s abundant grace. It is not a matter of having “enough” faith, even though faith does seem to impress Jesus in other places, and he does call for it in this man. But here, according to this sign, Jesus heals people simply because it is the work of his Father, who does not discriminate in giving good gifts, a God who wills that all may receive his living water and find abundant life.

Amen

Jesus how like you to intentionally choose to heal this obtuse man. You came to do your Father’s will; to reveal the gracious heart of the Father. Lord, in this healing we see in full display your grace, mercy, authority, and power. This healing is a free gift, just like your salvation is a free gift. While we were sinners, while we were God’s enemies, you died for us. In fact, you healed this man on the Sabbath to show your authority over the Sabbath, and also to set up the conditions that would lead to your sacrificial death. Thank you for your mercy that took you through the way of suffering for our salvation. Amen