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John 5:1-9
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DEAD DYING CHURCH: DO SOMETHING!

Some of you like to follow along as I read the scripture lesson, but there is something odd about the text this morning that only a Bible nerd would notice, and only the most accomplished Jeopardy contestant in the final round would know. The text that Chris read to you is John 5:1-9 — except there are only eight verses. As observant as he is, for he is a man of the text, I'm shocked that Chris did not say to you, "This morning's text comes from John, the first nine verses of the fifth chapter — except for the missing one of course — we're skipping that one, just like the Bible does!"

No kidding, look for yourself on page 90 in your pew Bible. Go ahead, take a look. We have verse one, which begins, "After this there was a festival of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem; followed by verse two, "Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha , which has five porticos; followed by verse three, In these lay many invalids — blind, lame, and paralyzed, followed by verse five, One man was there who had been there for thirty eight years.

See the problem. Verse five follows verse three, and either this is a major typo in this respected version of the Bible, or something is going on that has a back story. The back story is that the King James Version included a fourth verse that read, "For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had."

I like that. I want that back. It's beautiful, and it's vivid, and perhaps it helps to explain why this poor man who had been trying to get into the pool for 38 years is still an invalid. The water wasn't troubled most of the time, and

since apparently the angel did not announce itself ahead of time (this is not like Old Faithful in Yellowstone that erupts in predictable intervals) this poor man by the pool never gets himself into the water first. It wasn't his fault.

So why is this verse dropped in our Bible and in most modern translations? Because it does not appear in any of the best manuscripts we have, and its wording in Greek is unlike the rest of the gospel of John. Most scholars believe it was not part of the original gospel, and so they've dropped it from almost every scholarly translation of the Bible.

And while I was only half kidding when I said I'd like it back, I think I know why some later scribe, working by candlelight with quill on parchment added that verse to the story. Because it softens what is an otherwise very harsh text. If you believe that we are mostly the masters of our own destiny, and that nothing in life matters more than taking the initiative and not making excuses, then this is your text. If you believe that doing something is no guarantee of success but that failing to do anything is a guarantee of failure, then this is your text. Jesus tells this man that if he wants to be made well he has to do something.

I was driving down the highway in Arkansas one day and saw a sign that caught my eye. It read: LIMP IN, LEAP OUT! At first I thought it must be a slogan for a church that practiced healing — limp in here and when we're done with you will leap out! OK, a little hokey, but it was in Arkansas!

Then I looked closer at the establishment and realized that the sign was a garage that specialized in rehabilitating car springs. Oh I get it, limp in, leap out — very clever. But that's not the first thing I thought of. Because I hang out with too many preachers, I thought of the man by the pool who had spent his life waiting for a cure and had nothing to show for it. His limp prevented him, apparently, from accessing the healing properties that people believed the pool of Beth-zatha possessed — probably natural springs that human beings have believed, in every age and in all lands, could heal the sick if one soaked in them.

We have them today. In New Mexico there is place called Ojo Caliente, a spa in northern New Mexico where four different mineral springs surface in one spot, lithium, iron, soda, and arsenic — 100,000 gallons a day bubble up at a warm and constant temperature. For centuries the Native Americans who discovered it believed that the waters had healing properties.

The word spa comes from the Roman Salus Per Aquas, meaning "health through water." The Romans perfected the notion of the spa and believed in

the healing properties of water for centuries. Such healing waters were believed to bubble to the surface in many places. In old Jerusalem it was by the Sheep Gate in the northern wall of the city near the temple surrounded by four porticos. Archaeologists have discovered the remains of that site, and if you use your imagination you can see the scene in your mind. In every land, in every age, the sick come to places where they believe they might be made well.

They sat around this pool of water – the ill and infirm, the insane and the crippled, those who had no other options (and there weren't many options in those days — it's not like you went to a nursing home or assisted living facility). And make no mistake, part of the appeal of the pool was social — for those who need, as all human do, a community to be with — even if it's a community of the sick and dying, the lame, the withered, and the wailing — all hoping for a miracle when the waters began to stir. They all wanted to limp in and leap out.

Jesus sees a man that he knows is not just a “regular” at the pool. He practically lives there. He has been coming to the pool since before Jesus was born because he's been ill for 38 years. He must be known by everyone in town – you know, “the man at the pool,” the one who never makes it in on time but who keeps coming, keeps trying, and may have actually given up but doesn't know it yet.

We know these people if we will open our eyes. There are people all around us who seem to be permanently immobilized by their afflictions. If they didn't have bad luck they'd have no luck at all. “Sliding down the razor blade of life” as one down and out homeless man put it to me one day.

And I don't mean to minimize the tragic things that happen to people and the overwhelming grief that some people carry around. So many people are struggling just to get through another day; they are so beaten down; they have passed through such misery that they have all but lost the will to live. And they become almost paralyzed — unable even to do the things they might do to change their fate.

We all know people like this, and it's not just as simple as telling them to “get a job.” There are homeless people that we serve in the 363 Group that are unemployable — no one will hire them. Others, however, make you wonder: what is holding you back? Some look young enough and strong enough to find work or move to where the jobs are advertised.

A friend of mine who works with the homeless told me a story about a town in Nebraska where a plant was located that was desperate for workers and advertised the fact in a paper that was available to his clients in California. He

showed it to one of his regulars (a man who came to be fed every day). His response: “Oh, I couldn’t go to Nebraska, it’s too cold.” My friend shook his head and thought to himself: you sleep in the streets!

It fascinates me that the question Jesus always asks the man, as always, is about his will to be made whole. He says, “Do you want to be made well?” He does not say, “This is your lucky day, the son of God is at the pool.” He does not say, “Do you believe in God?” He does not say, “Do you have insurance?” He asks the man about his will to be made well. Do you want this.

Sure, I want it, he replies. But it is denied to me because others get in the pool ahead of me and I am left out. It’s crazy around here when the waters start to move. It’s like opening hour at the bargain basement sale, or the pre-dawn rush on Black Friday when people trample one another to get into a Wal Mart to buy cheap plastic junk. I can’t even walk and do you think anybody stops to ask if I need to be carried down to the water? No, they’re too busy looking out for number one. So I just lie here and think about how unfair life is. Surely you can see when you look at me that life is unfair?

But Jesus is not a therapist. He is a healer. He doesn’t want to discuss the causes; he wants to motivate the cure, and he is so perceptive that he knows that there are people who do not want to get well. That must sound crazy. Doesn’t every crippled person want to be healed. Yes and no. To walk again, certainly. But there are people who are emotionally crippled who do not want the responsibility of being whole. Their illness can actually provide them with a twisted form of power. It also becomes the explanation for every failure — what can you expect, after all? Look at me. I’m not well.

I knew a woman once who used her illness to get attention from her husband and other members of her family. Whenever a doctor would tell her that that he could find nothing wrong with her, and that she wasn’t really ill, she would find another doctor.

A few weeks ago, we heard during the Prayers of the People, a tribute to a woman who used to be a member of this church, Kathleen Miller. She was one of the last victims of childhood polio, but she never wanted a moment’s sympathy from anyone. She did amazing things with her life, even though I know she wanted, more than anything in the world, to get up out of that wheelchair and walk, and dance, and make love, and be like you and me.

But what she did do was everything she could do – where she was with what she had — to quote Mother Teresa. She took action. In her own way she got up and got into the pool. One cannot, to put this in theological terms,

receive grace until one reaches for it. It does not come out of a fire hose. The Greek word that translates faith in the New Testament is actually a verb not a noun. In the Jesus movement, one is involved in “faithing,” and now we speak about it as if it is something we possess. Got Faith? Got Jesus?

The gospel is not neutral energy, something we add to our tank like STP so we will get wherever we are going faster and with fewer knocks. It is not a suit of armor we put on to protect us from living in a violent world or a way to cloister ourselves away from the pain and stench of the world by gathering in well appointed, air-conditioned, ecclesiastical boudoirs that we call churches. It’s a place where we limp in so we can leap out.

I think the church is dying, not because of bad theology, but because we think correct theology is what will make us whole in the first place. We have turned religion into a set of ideas that we peddle as if one can purchase new life by signing on to the right doctrines and confessing the right creeds. In fact, in the hyper-intellectual, hyper individualistic culture that is the American Empire, we are sold this myth every single day. Health and wellness is a transaction, not an investment. It can be purchased. It can be packaged. It can be yours for three easy payments of 19.95.

But what saves us is what we do to change ourselves and the world — not what we think about doing, or what we think is a really good idea about five things we might do to change things. I know something about this because I have one foot in the sanctuary and one foot in the world of academia. Nobody on earth has more faith in the power of a report, a white paper, an essay of the latest paradigm shift in teaching than the administration of a university. We produce a lot of reports. We bring in experts to teach us how to teach, and yet this knowledge itself is not redemptive. Teaching, like life, is about passion. You can’t just talk about a good idea. You have to look like a good idea with flesh on.

Students are not just listening to what you tell them, they are studying you as a human being and they have very little patience for empty lectures. What they really want to know is what are you up to in the world and is it worthy? They don’t care about denominations anymore, but they are very interested in mission—in 363 and Nicaragua and Whiz Kids, and the fact that Mayflower is an open and affirming church that pushes back against the homophobia of this culture. They are immersed in good words about good ideas for doing good things—but they want to see it.

In fact, the church of the future will not be saved by what it believes, but by what it does. And Jesus will be the head of the church not because he

secures for us a cosmic bargain but because he motivates us to transformative work in a broken world. Liberals and conservatives alike will be able to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and invite those who are paralyzed by self-loathing to get up and walk.

Jesus was not a theologian. He was spiritual provocateur. He was an invitation to a different way of living and he knew that he did not have a lot of time and neither do we. So he said to the Samaritan woman at the well, I know you are thirsty, but I have water that if you drink it you will never be thirsty again. He tells a paralytic whose friends lower him down through a hole they chopped in the roof of the house where he was staying (talk about doing something), rise, take up your pallet and walk.

We can talk about it, of course. Talk about the benefits of walking. Do some research on the history of walking. Host a seminar to hear from famous walkers about how they found the joy of walking and published books about walking. But in the end, we are the ones who have to get up and walk.

Fred Craddock tells the story of his first crush on a girl in school. She seemed out of his league, an impossible dream. He was afraid to talk to her; afraid even to look at her. So, he said, in the privacy of my mind I asked her out on a date, and in the privacy of my mind she said no. And that's when I knew, in the privacy of my mind, that it was a mistake to ask her out in the first place.

What is holding you back right now? What has you paralyzed? Has someone else told you that you can't be well, or have you told yourself that? After the final hymn this morning, you may think that we have all done something in here. But that would be a mistake. We have issued an invitation in here. Fear not. Know that you are worthy — a child of God who is made for fullness of life, not paralysis — real or self-inflicted. Know that you still matter to those around you and that when you act in love you heal a small part of this broken world.

Don't feel sorry for yourself. Feel sorry for those who are looking to you for inspiration and encouragement. You may have limped in here, but you can leap out (I'll have Richard play some leaping out music). Don't sit out your life. Don't stand around the edges of your life afraid of rejection or full of excuses. Ask somebody to dance. Tell someone you love them. Go out of your way to be kind. Be patient when the world slows you down. Say to the young black man who sacks your groceries, "Thank you sir." Hold the door for someone. Remember your mother and all the time she told you, "Get up, you're late, brush your teeth, do your homework — nobody else is going to do it for you."

Speak to the child with Down Syndrome. Play the circle game with Larry Wyatt. Do not participate in petty gossip. Find a child who needs a mentor and be a hero to that child. To care is to make a difference in someone's life, not to expound on the benefits of caring. To love is to refuse to be immobilized by fear and cynicism. If the church of Jesus Christ is to survive it will not be because we all finally agree on the fundamentals, but because we are fundamentally about love.

Jesus was not a theologian. He was, strange as it sounds, an action figure. With urgency and compassion he moved through his world with one simple question: What are you waiting for? You can do this? You were born for this? Rise, take up your pallet and walk.

Amen.



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