

“Healing Up a Storm” John 1:1-18

6/10/18

Some new houses have been going up in my neighborhood over the last couple years. One of the new homeowners takes great pride in his landscaping, and in order to protect his new plants beside the sidewalk, he put up not one, not two, but three signs along a narrow twenty-foot strip of land all saying, in various ways, that you should not let your dog (How shall I say this delicately?) relieve itself there! One sign, OK. Two, well, maybe one at each end. But three?! I was severely tempted to park my dog there under cover of darkness until, well, you get the point. Sometimes you just want to break the rules! In this morning’s passage from John, Jesus does a little rule-breaking himself, but with dire consequences. The story starts innocently enough in John 5.

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When 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?” ⁷The 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.” ⁸Jesus 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. (John 5:1-9a)

Jesus, being an observant Jewish man, goes to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the Jewish festivals. He goes to the pool of Bethzatha, which you can still see today. It was surrounded by covered porches, giving shade to those sitting or lying beside the pool. There is actually some debate about the exact name, with Bethesda being the variation used in the King James version. In fact, when President Franklin Roosevelt was looking for a location for the new National Institutes of Health, he drove through a small town outside of Washington, D.C. His aide pointed out that the town had the same name as the pool where Jesus healed a paralyzed man, and FDR immediately chose Bethesda, Md. as the site of the new NIH! But I digress!

Jesus picked out a paralyzed man, a paraplegic, out of all those lying around the pool. Why were they lying there? Look carefully at verse 4. Oops. There is no verse 4, is there? The King James Version, using Greek texts more recent than the ones we have now, included a verse that was added later that tells us that the people were by the pool, “waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that

person had.” That’s why all those sick people were waiting around the pool. You can find the missing verse four in a footnote at the bottom of the page in your pew Bible. At any rate, Jesus chose this paraplegic, a kind of worst case who had been afflicted for 38 years. In those days he would have been unable to work, would have had trouble bathing, and may have had issues with bladder and bowel control. Not many people would have wanted anything to do with him. Except, that is, for Jesus.

Jesus asks him an interesting question- “Do you want to be made well?” That may seem like a dumb question. Of course he wanted to be made well! But, maybe not. Getting well would have involved a radical change of life after 38 years of doing the same thing every day! The man explains that he can’t get to the pool in time to be healed when the water is stirred, because he can’t walk and no one will help him. Jesus, without asking the man about his faith or anything else, simply instructs him to “*Stand up, take your mat, and walk.*” And at once the man was healed!

What a wonderful story of Jesus’ compassion for a man who was desperately in need and without hope! But things are about to get much more complicated!

Now that day was a sabbath. ¹⁰So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” ¹¹But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your

mat and walk.” ¹²They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk?’”¹³Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. ¹⁴Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” ¹⁵The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. (John 5:9b-16)

One of the things that kept the Jewish people distinct was their observance of the Sabbath. It was instituted by God in the Ten Commandments, which said, “*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work...*” (Ex. 20:10a)

But a law like this one raised questions. We are prohibited from working on the Sabbath, but what exactly constitutes work? The rabbis came up with 39 different categories of work! And each of them was carefully defined. Regarding Jesus’ actions here, healing someone was considered work. It was permitted only when the healing was necessary to save someone’s life. And carrying any kind of burden (like a mat) was strictly forbidden, to the point that it was forbidden to carry even a needle inside one’s robe! Jesus broke their Sabbath rules once by healing the

man, and a second time by instructing him to carry his mat. Two strikes against Jesus!

Initially, the man who was accosted by the Sabbath police doesn't know who healed him, but he still blames him for his Sabbath violation. Later, after Jesus seeks him out, he tells them Jesus' identity. Thanks a lot!

At this point I'd like to address an issue that we'll encounter throughout John, his use of the term "the Jews." John uses the phrase to mean several different things. Sometimes it refers to the people of Judea, as distinct from those in Galilee. Sometimes it refers to all the Jewish people, as in verse 1, when it refers to "a festival of the Jews." Most often, it refers to the Jewish leaders, as it clearly does here in verse 16 ("the Jews started persecuting Jesus"). It clearly doesn't refer to all the Jews, because Jesus, his disciples, and many of his other followers were Jewish!

John's multiple uses of the phrase can be confusing, and at times it has been misused by the church to cast aspersions on all Jewish people to the point of inciting violence against them, since "the Jews" in John's gospel refuse to recognize Jesus as God's Son and advocate that he be crucified. In fact, many Jews followed Jesus, and the message of John is

that the sin of the whole world was what caused Jesus to die. We'll come back to this issue again later.

At any rate, these Jewish leaders call Jesus out for breaking the Sabbath. (Oddly, they don't even seem to notice the wonder of the healing itself!) Jesus doesn't try to smooth things over with his answer. In fact, he is provocative! *¹⁷But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working."¹⁸For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.* (John 5:17-18) Theologians had long noted that while people rest on the Sabbath, God is still at work. For example, people are born and die on the Sabbath, actions attributed to God. Jesus says that like his heavenly Father, he is also allowed to do works of good on the Sabbath- that he is not subject to their rules. They were incensed by his claims for two major reasons.

First, his words were a challenge to their authority and to the whole social order. Of all people, we Presbyterians should understand that! We like things to be done "decently and in order." But here was Jesus operating openly outside of the law and attempting to justify his behavior. There is a real sense in which Jesus' actions here are a kind of civil disobedience! The paralyzed man had been afflicted for 38 years! He

certainly could have waited one more day for his healing. But Jesus chose to heal him on the Sabbath, and chose to instruct him to take up his mat and walk. This was a deliberate violation of Sabbath law.

But the religious leaders were even more enraged by Jesus' defense. They understood that Jesus was claiming to be equal with God, that he was claiming equal authority and privilege with the Father. And unless that claim is true, Jesus was committing blasphemy, which was punishable by death. That's why they wanted to kill him. The next 28 verses are Jesus' expanded defense of his claim to be the Son of God, which you can read on your own. But I'd like us to think together about this issue of Jesus' identity, because I believe it is almost as controversial and offensive today as it was in Jesus' time.

We live in a culture that is pluralistic, that is, it has and tolerates many points of view. Our constitution guarantees such a society and we have all benefited from it. The problem comes when anyone makes an absolute truth claim in such a society. And Christians do. We claim that 2000 years ago in Bethlehem God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus. And that Jesus, as God's Son, showed and taught us how we should live, died for the sins of the world, and was raised from the dead. And we believe with John, that whoever believes in Jesus, whoever trusts their life to him, will have eternal life. And that salvation is not found anywhere else,

because Jesus is God's provision for our salvation. That's core Christian belief.

But in a world that says that one claim of truth is as good as any other, or that truth doesn't even matter anymore, these claims about Jesus being God's only Son can sound bigoted and offensive. It's OK to talk about Jesus as a great moral teacher, but not as God's only provision for our salvation.

Now if the invitation to follow Jesus were open only to say, white people or Americans or rich people or whatever, it would be bigoted and offensive. But the invitation is open to all people. God so loved the world! And while there was a time when the majority of Christians lived in Europe and North America, today the majority live in Africa and Asia. Jesus is truly a Savior for all people in all cultures, and he is able to make a difference in the lives of people everywhere.

In claiming that Jesus is the unique Son of God, we're swimming against the cultural tide, and we should acknowledge that. Jesus was swimming against the tide in first-century Palestine when he made that claim, and the church, when it has most closely followed Jesus, has been counter-cultural ever since. In stories like this one, John wants us to see that following Jesus will put us at odds with the world around us, and he is

right. But God's Spirit will help us to know what to say and how to act in those times. For that we give thanks to God!