

## **Sermon for August 25, 2019 – “Made Well ”**

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts: John 5:1-9

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Easter season's been over for some time. We're now in what's called ordinary time. We actually have been for some time; something like three weeks. Now, the term “ordinary” some say is derived from the word “ordinal” which means “counted.” On the other hand, say others, ordinary may just mean ordinary. This isn't necessarily negative it's simply the time of the year when we're **not** commemorating some major event in the life of Jesus such as His birth, death, and resurrection, but rather the things He said and did throughout His time on earth. It seems to me that most of the days of our lives are ordinary; no birth or death, no epiphanies or miracles, just time filled with the ordinary love, hope and fear that's common to daily life. So, ultimately, ordinary time can be understood in terms of the living out of Christian faith and the meaning of Christ's resurrection in ordinary life.

Today, we reach way back into the story of Jesus. Before Last Suppers, before betrayals, before trials and crucifixions, before resurrection and miracles. We go back and see with Easter eyes. We can do that because the resurrection wasn't a “one-and-done” kind of deal. We can do that because Christ is still risen. We see too that Jesus has been showing us resurrection from the very beginning. But we can only see it now, only with a little hindsight. Today, a man who cannot walk lays between the pillars of the Sheep Gate Portico, a public square in Jerusalem. He watches as people file by, ordinary people. He watches as other beggars, the lame and blind, deaf and unclean, lay there with him. Many are bathing in the spring water pool hoping to be healed of their infirmities. But the man who cannot walk has no such hope. Instead, he's only looking for the charity of others as he's been doing for 38 years. 38 years! Apparently, he believed the legend. Now according to the legend at certain times an angel of the Lord would come to stir up the waters of the pool. The first person into the water after this is believed to be healed. This portico is a place where people in need of healing gather. But the man cannot walk so there's no way he's ever going to get to the pool first, not without help. So he just lays there. As he does, a group of men come by and stop. One of them speaks to the beggar asking him a question. But without really hearing what's been asked the man who can't walk launches into his story his hands extended. “Sir,” he says. “I have no one to put me into the pool when the water's stirred up and while I'm making my way someone else steps down ahead of me.” It's probably a pretty well-rehearsed story. It's short, it's to the point, and it's designed to move people to get out their wallets. The man's been telling it for decades. He isn't expecting healing. He's expecting pity or charity. A few coins so he can provide for himself a few more days.

But the question that the man's asked isn't "Why haven't you gotten into the pool?" **That** question is way too absurd to contemplate. I mean, seriously, thirty-eight years is **far** too long for no one to have done anything for this man. Is it just me or is it really hard to imagine that this man could have been laying just a few yards from healing for nearly four decades? How could that happen? It's almost too bad to be true. Think about it this way, you see someone panhandling; what goes through your mind? You pass these people on your way somewhere downtown, you see them at intersections or standing at the exits off of the highway holding little signs that usually say, "I'm homeless, please help." Maybe "God bless you" which they do just to make you feel guilty, of course. You've seen these people, haven't you? What's your first thought? Well, the conventional wisdom is that these people are lazy bums. These are people who will just use the money for alcohol or drugs. They're scam artists who, at the end of the day, are going to drive off in a brand new Mercedes. Admit it, we've all seen these people and lots of people think that they're living large off of handouts. And some actually do. Some panhandlers make upwards of \$80,000 per year but those are the exception instead of the rule. In a recent survey 94% of panhandlers use the money they get to simply purchase the food they need. In San Francisco, for example where the average income is just over \$92,000, the average daily intake for a panhandler is just \$25/day. Some have been living this way for 5 years or more. Many must opt for the cheapest food options available which means less nutritious foods so that they can stretch their money further. Two quick facts, 1) Only 3% of panhandlers **don't** want some form of help in getting permanent housing, anything that'd get them off of the street. 2) One out of every four panhandlers in the United States has served in the military at some point in time.

The answer that the man in our gospel reading has simply fallen through the cracks of society for so long is too painful to imagine. How could that happen? This story demands a question. "Why has no one helped this man? How could he have been left to suffer for 38 years?" It seems ridiculous. Almost too absurd to be true. And yet the same question could be asked pretty much anywhere you look. This story's not only NOT absurd, but it's a story told all around us. What am I talking about? Well, let's look at this shall we? Let's talk about all these mass shootings. How many gun-related deaths have to happen before we do something about guns? Well, we need to start enforcing the laws that are already on the books. Fine, when do we start doing that? Actually, we should do more/better background checks, try to close all those loopholes. Okay, let's get to it. Now, you may say actually, it's not a gun issue it's a mental health issue! Great, when do we start taking better care of people with mental illness? This is all well and good, but the real problem is the opioid crisis. Fine. How many more people have to die of overdoses? But what about all the teenagers committing suicide? How many more need to die before we commit to doing something? How. Many. More.?

These questions are hard to ask and even harder to imagine. The seeming indifference it took to let these problems fester in our world. Yet, there's a problem with **all** these questions. The questions are no more compassionate than the indifference and inaction that they question. Asking why no one's helped is more about us than it is about the people suffering. It's more about making our own guilt go away than offering what suffering people really need.

Did anyone notice that when Jesus approached the man who couldn't walk, He didn't ask "Why has no one helped this man in 38 years?" Jesus doesn't jump to solving problems. He does **not**, and this is important, define the man by his condition. I'll repeat that...He does **not** define the man by his condition. Jesus doesn't dehumanize the man like some hero swooping in to save the day. Instead, Jesus asks the man who cannot walk, "**Do you want to be made well?**" Jesus is concerned with the man. Jesus recognizes the man. Jesus **humanizes** the man. Jesus isn't there to save the day; He's there to save the **man**. Jesus doesn't do it by dragging the man into the pool. He doesn't even do it by helping the man walk. Jesus saves the man by seeing a person first and condition second by seeing a person rather than a problem. Jesus embraces and acknowledges the man's humanity. "**Do you want to be made well?**" It's a question about what the man needs and wants. It's about how the man wants to address his own suffering. Jesus isn't there to force solutions on a problem but to care for a person the way in which they need care. It's this that saves the man. Not the healing pool. Not the command to walk. Jesus saves the man by caring for him as a person. Jesus saves him by turning him from a problem into a human being. Before the man ever takes a step, Jesus welcomes this man back into relationship. Jesus welcomes this man back into life and the man who'd been lame for 38 years gets up and walks. He walks because Jesus has seen him, recognized him, welcomed him back to life, restored him to true life to be more than his problems, to be more than injustice, to be more than legs that don't work right.

"**Do you want to be made well?**" Jesus' question is rarely one we ask of those who're suffering. Human beings rarely take the time to ask this of each other because it requires, we get out of ourselves. Because when we ask it, we realize that problems we see around us are not just situations needing solutions. If we were to ask questions that humanize one another we would see the world differently. I'm talking about everyone. From those who show up at our southern borders to those that showed up last year when we opened our doors for the City Gospel Mission Thanksgiving Exchange and Christmas Store, to those who show up for our Third Thursday dinners. We are all those people just as we are the man who's not walked for 38 years too. "We are all mere beggars," as Martin Luther said, "showing other beggars where to find bread." We are the ones whom Jesus is asking, "**Do you want to be made well?**"

Today, as Hannah is baptized taken to the water of the baptismal font, we're reminded of something. We're reminded that Jesus has asked us this question too.

That God has seen us, recognized us, named us and claimed us. In the waters of baptism Jesus turns us into people. Jesus welcomes us into new life. We stop being defined by the problems of sin and death. We stop being the sum total of the suffering we endure, and Jesus turns us into people, into beloved children of God. And in this act of God in these cleansing and healing waters God says to us: **“Stand up and walk.”** And through the waters of Baptism we are raised to new life, we are raised to walk, to walk in this life of faith. That is its gift. Today we see that Jesus has been showing us resurrection from the very beginning. Sometimes it’s hard to see. Sometimes our problems blind us. Thus the question, **“Do you want to be made well?”** In many ways it’s a question about how we see ourselves. And how is that exactly? How do we see ourselves? As Jesus sees the man who couldn’t walk whom no one bothered to help for 38 years Jesus sees us as well for who we really are. Jesus sees beyond all injustice, all the violence, all the death, all the suffering, all the pain, all the fear, all the guilt, all the anxiety in our lives and sees **us**, not as a set of problems that seek to define us or that need to be solved but as people beloved and cherished by God. And because God has seen us and loved us, we are able to stand up and walk. We are made well!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.