



Lent reflection for Thursday, March 23rd

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John 2:5-9

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 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?’ 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.’ 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.

Today’s reflection is by Michael Hendrick

I really enjoyed reflecting on this passage. It’s a challenging one. I had a few questions, like where does the man go after he picks up his mat and walks away? Or, why does Jesus seem to ask this man if he wants to be well before he heals him?

This passage is as complicated as the tangled web the sick man has woven for himself. He’s been sick for almost four decades, he’s waiting in the portico to get into the pools of Bethesda, but he keeps missing his chance. This, in a nutshell, is the long, non-responsive explanation he gives to Jesus in response to Jesus’s simple question: do you want to be made well? He’s just been offered a miracle, and this man is still convinced that what he really needs is a Greco-Roman bath with “stirring” waters, and that he still has a chance of getting in after all this time. The sick man almost seems defiant- I’m sticking to my plan for getting well, even if it hasn’t worked yet.

What I truly love about the Gospel is this: if this story was any garden variety folk-tale, or at least the western variety that I’m accustomed to, the guy doling out the healing would have moved on and left this sick man to his vicious cycles. And then we would hear *“the moral of the story*

is” followed by something like “don’t look a gift horse in the mouth” or “if you want help, you must ask for it.” But the Gospel isn’t a folktale. The purpose of this passage is not to teach any pro-social lesson, it’s about grace. Healing grace came to this man, even when he didn’t know he needed it. He thought he needed to be inside the baths, but he was absolutely right where he needed to be.

Recently, one Sunday, I came to church with something that was really bothering me, that I couldn’t shake. It really was a matter of self-forgiveness- I was pretty angry at myself - and I kept thinking that I could deal with it on my own and untie the knot in my head. My attention was split between the ongoing mass and my own mental gymnastics. As one could imagine, I was not making any progress. As I looked up into the rafters during the communion hymn, a thought suddenly came to my head: I’m sitting in a church right now, a place of forgiveness. I’m certainly allowed to forgive myself here. Suddenly, I was able to let go of some of the anger I was feeling. Like the sick man in the portico, I too had woven a tangled web, without realizing that I was absolutely where I needed to be at that moment.

Michael lives in Park Slope with lovely wife Magda and their two amazing sons Samuel and Daniel. They have been attending Holy Apostles since the Fall of 2022.

