



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS  
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“UNTIL TODAY”:  
SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—11:15 SERVICE

ACTS 16: 9-15

PSALM 67

REVELATIONS 21:10, 22-22:5

JOHN 5: 1-9

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY  
MAY 22, 2022

*While I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.* Here is a sick man who has been waiting for healing by the Pool of Beth-zatha for 38 years. I have been to this pool, near St. Anne's church in Jerusalem. When you peer down into the excavation, there are layers and layers. There is a crusader church, then 2<sup>nd</sup> century Roman healing baths, then way down at the bottom the remains of this pool. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century excavations, scholars thought there was no such thing as a 5-sided pool. But it is 5 sided, and each side has a portico where the sick wait until the water bubbles up. Some later manuscripts add it was an "angel" who troubled the water. Probably it was a geothermal hot spring. The warm water and healing minerals are what the everyone is waiting for. There is a scramble to be first into the bubbling water because that is when the healing properties are believed to be greatest. Many of the sick have helpers. This man has no one to help him. He is never first. The gospel implies he can move, but very slowly, perhaps crawling not walking.

What must his life be like? In that culture, physical sickness is viewed as punishment for sin. As though it is not enough

to be sick, your illness is your fault or your parents' fault. The pool is a place of spiritual "unclean-ness" for the whole community. You don't go there unless you need to. An adult who cannot do physical work was a problem for a family in those days. I imagine that his family use the pool as free adult day care, a place to take him and leave him. What must his days be like? How overlooked and how disregarded he is. How he is ignored and stepped over every single day, as though he is invisible.

*While I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.* How true to life this is. First come first served. How often in life do people elbow others out of the way? For 38 years, others at the pool have watched this man be left behind. How often do those with the most resources – the most connections - receive even more, while those who already have least resources, receive even less. Those who already have medical insurance receive the best specialist care; those who have large investments accrue more compound interest. Wealth begets more wealth. Fame and likes beget more fame and attention. Those with the top jobs receive access to more invitations into power.

38 years later, this man is still waiting for it to be his turn. Until today. Here comes Jesus who *knows he has been waiting a long time*. Jesus' eyes always go to margins, to the one who is left out. That is our invitation too. Jesus asks: *Do you want to be made well?* Jesus doesn't step over him or past him. Jesus stops and talks and helps.

What Jesus does is a small disruption with big implications. Jesus subverts the access system. The reward is healing, and access is competitive – first one or two into the water are healed. The man doesn't even need to get into the pool to be healed. Jesus heals him directly.

In John's gospel, this goes on to be a Sabbath violation story. Rabbinic law teaches that it's fine to heal a life-threatening condition on the Sabbath, but not a chronic condition like this, which could be healed any day. The second Sabbath violation is that there are also laws against carrying things outside your house, even a mat. For us today that seems disproportionate. The religious leaders are worried about a man picking up a mat and here he has

been cured of a disease which left him unable to walk? Talk about straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel! Yet, to understand the context, it is all about taking the Sabbath seriously. The ancient Hebrews know how easily we are sucked into more tasks when God wants for us to be resting and renewing our energies on the Sabbath. So they put in place elaborate rules about *not* working to protect our Sabbath rest. As with so many spiritual practices that can be distorted, it starts from a good place.

However, Jesus is a 24/7 disrupter. During his ministry, Jesus disrupts culture, religion, hate, sickness, even death. Jesus disrupts power structures and religious purity laws. He bypasses the control of the religious leaders in unauthorized healing. Jesus disrupts economic systems – overturns the money-changers tables in the Temple. Jesus says – give to Caesar what is Caesar’s – pay your fair share of taxes and be a responsible citizen – but give everything else you are and everything else you have to God who has given those gifts on loan to you. Jesus consistently disrupts access systems. All of them. Isn’t this what seeking justice is? Isn’t this what anti-racism is? Reworking access systems

so that resources are equally open to all? Here it is healing. But there are also feeding miracles and stories about importunate widows and Canaanite women who keep asking until they receive equal treatment. There isn't one area of human life that Jesus doesn't disrupt with his equal access habits.

Where do we need Jesus' disruptive healing power? Some people always let others go ahead of them. Is that you? As though grace is for everyone else before you? Are you someone who always puts *yourself* last, even when you have been waiting the longest? Do you stay at the back of the queue even when you are the most in need? If that is us, we too can we claim our turn. We all have a place in the water, not forever waiting at the edge. The way of competition says: there are always going to be some who win and some who lose for their whole lives in the rush to the water. Grace says: this is not true. There is enough healing to go around. There is plenty of Holy Spirit. There is plenty of baptismal water. There is plenty of Jesus.

Lastly, and this is very important, it is not only what Jesus does but how he does it. Jesus' disruption is always done in a way that builds up human lives and community in a healthy way. It is never violent, it is never coercive, it is never vengeful. Jesus disrupts in a way that heals, that builds up. Jesus disrupts exclusion with inclusion. In face of war and cruelty, erosion of civil rights, in the wake of racist murders in Buffalo and California, this is the witness we need. This is the witness we follow. May we see as Jesus sees. May our eyes go to the margins, to the back of the room, to the left out on the edge of the crowd. May we too disrupt hate with love. May we disrupt isolation with community. May we disrupt separation with solidarity. May we push back the barriers to equal access for all.

AMEN

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