

Good To Go!

May 1, 2016 John 5:1-9a

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Yes, it's still Easter season in church. So yes, we are still thinking about resurrection stories. But today's story is not about Jesus' resurrection, but rather someone more like us. In fact, maybe someone a lot like us. It's a short story, especially for John's gospel. But it is jam packed with meaning and images and message. There may be lots of questions in there, too. Questions, like, how in the world do you even survive for 38 years outside, unable to walk, without assistance. At least those are some of the questions that always hit me when I read this story.

The setting is the Sheep's Gate in Jerusalem. More accurately, the pool near the gate that was known as Beth-zatha, which means House of Mercy. So we are at the mercy pool. And yet, the ill man hasn't found much mercy in 38 years. Thirty eight years he has been ill. The story implies he has been waiting by the pool many if not all those years. This pool was a healing site. Legend had it that every so often, but not on a predictable schedule, an angel would come and trouble the waters. First one in the pool would find miraculous healing. I imagine a shrine-like scene; the caves of Lourdes France or the hills of Medjugorje. The ill and hurting of all sorts crowded with anticipation around the pool. When will the angel show? Is THAT a ripple in the water??? Is MY healing at hand?

Our ill man lies longing to be the first in the pool. His eyes never leave the water lest he miss the tell-tale ripple of the angel. But alas, when he DOES catch a glimpse of those troubled waters, he is never the first to make it into the pool. But he is diligent. He is tenacious. He hangs in there, hoping against hope that this next time will be his time.

And then along comes Jesus. And as so often happens, when Jesus shows up, things change, but rarely in the way we expect them to. Jesus shows up and he knows the man has been there a long time. "Do you want to get well?" he asks the man. 'Oh you BET I do.' he says. "You can't imagine how much and how deeply I want to get well!" Oh wait....he doesn't say that does he? No, he does not directly answer Jesus; question 'do you want to get well.' Instead, he offers up excuses and explanations for why his situation remains ever the same. No one will help me. Every one else beats me out. Someone else always gets there first. Excuses for why he is not well, not an answer to the query if he wants to be well.

Jesus looks at him and says 'stand up, take up your mat and walk'; simple as that. And all at once, before the man even has a chance to protest 'I cannot'....he is made well, he is whole. And he does indeed, pick up his mat and walk away. Basically, Jesus looks at him and says 'You're good to go. You don't need a pool of mercy. Get up and go.' Like I said, it's not the thing we expect. Jesus' word alone sets this man on a new path, literally. Jesus' word alone brings the wholeness that has escaped him for so very long, for 38 years to be exact. The pool fades in the background of the story as an inconsequential detail that we wonder why we even bothered with in the first place.

And there is a key to this story for us. The man is fixated on that pool for years. He is convinced that it holds the answer to his needs. He sits on his mat, week in and week out, waiting and waiting to be the first to wade in the water. But he never is the first. In fact, from what he tells Jesus, it is doubtful he ever stands a chance. He cannot make it on his own, no one ever offers to help, there are always plenty of other seekers that will beat him out. Always. And yet he sticks

with his plan. What in the world makes him think that today will be any different? He is fixated on this one path to healing. An improbable path covered with obstacles. But he cannot see any other possibility; he cannot be open to another way. Indeed, when Jesus asks him if he wants to get well, he doesn't even to think follow that path. 'I do....do you have any ideas? do you have a suggestion? can you help me?' No sir, he knows the answer to his dilemma and he's sticking with it, and it lies in the pool.

Have you ever been there? Stuck on a mat of your own, sure you knew what was needed. And yet the longer you sat there, the less things changed? It can be so hard for us to open up to the wild and crazy things Jesus might lay at our feet. We think we know all we need to know. We think the ways of this world are the best ways. We think inside boxes and conventionality all the time. We look for new life in the old ways, in the tomb. We do the same things over and over hoping for a different outcome. We ignore Jesus as he stands before us and asks 'do you want to be made whole and new?'

Maybe because the answer is too terrifying. You know the adage; we prefer the devil we know to the one we don't know. The man knows, surely he knows at some deep level, that he is NEVER going to make it into those troubled waters. But what would happen if he gave up that goal of getting into the water? What if he changed his focus? I would bet that unknown territory would be a tad frightening. But what if he doesn't? What if stays fixated on that pool day in and day out, ignoring Jesus' words? Then what.....well nothing. Then nothing will ever change.

We all think we know what we need; we need to get into that pool that everyone else tells us will heal us. We need the big house and the flashy car. We need the wardrobe and the bank account that out flashes our neighbors. We need to be on the go constantly, filling every waking moment with activity of some sort or another. Yes, we think we know so well what we need. And then along comes Jesus. And he asks us a simple question. And our choice is to do as he says, or keep trying to get into the pool with everyone else.

Pick up your mat and go. His words are direct and surprising. How, how in the world can I pick up my mat and go? How could I possibly leave this job? Sure, it bores me to death, but I've been there longer than I can remember. Pick up your mat and go. What... Start seminary at 50 years old? That makes no sense! Pick up your mat and go. The invitation from Jesus is always to new life, to resurrected life. But it is rarely what we expect. Did you notice that Jesus found the man? The man was stuck on his mat, he was not hollering out for Jesus, he hadn't sent someone to find Jesus for him. No, Jesus found him. And so it is with us. Jesus is always seeking us out, asking us if we want what he has to offer; wholeness and peace, new life and community. All we have to do is listen to him and follow.

The trouble is we think in conventional terms; healing comes from the pool of mercy, no where else. The trouble is we make excuses and cast blame everywhere but where it belongs; no one will help me into the water, I always get beat out. The trouble is we are stuck on our mats, unwilling or unable to open to the seeming impossibilities of grace that Jesus offers us day in and day out. The trouble is we don't listen when he tells us we are good to go, to pick up our mats and go. The trouble is we don't really answer his question; do you want to be well?

Where in your life are you stuck on your mat? Is it a bad relationship? An addiction? Negativity and gossip? A dead end job? A lifeless marriage? Loneliness? Fear? Close your eyes and listen for Jesus' invitation to resurrection. Where is new life waiting for you, like the man by the pool?

But be ready; his invitation may seem preposterous. It may seem ridiculous, even nonsense. Trust him. Believe him; you are good to go. Pick up that mat and go. Accept the gift of wholeness and new life.

Today we will gather at the table in remembrance of this Jesus who calls us to new life. It is indeed the table where we are made whole, where we are healed, where we are brought into community in this mysterious sacrament. We will come forward to receive by intinction today. After you have come to the table, you are invited to be anointed if you choose. Anointing is a symbol of healing, but it is also used to mark us as God's own, and to recognize us as community. Next to the anointing stations are baskets filled with little mats. You are invited to pick up your own mat to take out into the world with you. Use it to help you reflect upon those stuck places of your life. Use it to remind you to listen for God's voice. Use it as a remembrance that Jesus calls all of us into new and resurrected life. Use it to stir you to pick up your mat and go. Indeed, we are all Good To Go! Amen.