

Someone Else

John 5:1-8

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 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.”

Thirty-eight years. He’s been sick for thirty-eight years. It’s a lifetime, almost literally — with differences in life expectancy, the man in this story has been sitting sick for not just most of his life but most of any life. Thirty-eight years of birthdays. Thirty-eight years of passovers. Thirty-eight years of festivals. Thirty-eight years of harvests. Thirty-eight years he has been sick. Ill. We don’t know exactly what his illness is but clearly it leaves him mobility-impaired. He can’t move easily. In the age of COVID I think we can perhaps access a bit of empathy for what it feels like to be sick and confined, sick and stuck, sick and unable to get around, sick and unable to leave your room or unable to leave your house. For a couple of weeks. And this man has been sick for thirty-eight years.

And in all this time. Or at least in some of this time. For some big chunk of this time, he has been sitting by this pool, this pool called Beth-saida. By all accounts it is the place to go — here he is surrounded also by others who are also sick, who are blind, who are paralyzed. The name itself, Beth-saida, means “House of Mercy.” Because there’s something special about this pool. Sometimes, the water moves. Now, the Gospel-writer is not particularly curious about why the water moves. This is not a story compelled by geology or fluid mechanics. Perhaps there’s an ancient spring that feeds the pool. Perhaps sulfur running up through the crust. We can only speculate — as can the first readers of this text. In fact some early variants of this text conclude that the water is moving because an Angel comes down to stir it every once in a while.

But what everyone agrees is: the water makes you feel better. Of course we can still ask our modern questions. Does the water make you feel better because just sitting in the jacuzzi works wonders on your muscles, on your pains; is this just modern spa therapy rendered into Biblical Jerusalem? Or is there something truly supernatural at work, waters in fact touched by an angel, waters that have the real power to cure, to heal, to bring those dry bones back to life? You might suspect the former. The text might imply the latter. But in some ways it’s a distinction without a difference. Because what’s happening in this text is that there’s a sick man sitting next to a pool that might make him feel better. And for thirty-eight years. Nobody will let him in.

“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.” What a telling response. Jesus asks him, “Do you wish to be made well?” and the man responds, I’ve been here for thirty-eight years wishing to be made well. To be honest I find Jesus’s question almost insulting. Do I wish to be made well? Let me tell you about how much I wish to be made well. I would like to get from this chair to that pool and I have been trying to do it for thirty-eight years if that counts for anything but every time the angel comes and stirs up the water I can’t get there. Nobody will carry me. It takes me too long to scoot along to the water’s edge. And by time I get there everybody else in town has rushed over. And there’s never room left. Somebody else steps down ahead of me. Every time.

Do I wish to be made well? It’s belittling. What are you saying, that if I had only wished harder I would have made it in that pool to begin with? What are you saying, that if I had only worked harder, if I had only worked smarter, if I had only pulled myself up from my bootstraps, so to speak, I would have found my way into that healing water? They always ask “Do you wish to be made well?” instead of asking “Why will nobody let me in?” Why do they keep walking past me and nobody sees? Why do they keep getting in the pool in front of

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me though I have been waiting my turn for 38 years? Why is this system rigged to exclude me and none of you even seem to notice? And now at last we have the scandal in this text. It's not the faith of the sick man on trial here. The real tragedy is that the healing waters were there the whole time and nobody gave him access.

Before I came to UPC I served in a small congregation in rural Virginia, a small church that worshiped about 40 on a Sunday and had about 100 on the rolls if we counted generously. It was an old family congregation; not a lot of folks came and went, most people knew each other going back generations. And when we got to this day on that church's calendar — the day when we ordain elders and deacons — I would get to the part of that liturgy where we invite previously ordained folks to come forward for the laying on of hands, and basically, the whole congregation would come up. Basically, half the congregation was on the session at any given time, and when you rotated off, you waited your turn for a couple of years and then somebody tapped you on the shoulder and back you went.

Or so I thought. Because it turned out that actually when I called for all those ordained folks to come forward, there were a few that never came. They never came up despite having been deeply involved in the ministry of the church for decades. Mostly they were long-ago refugees from more conservative churches. And they were all women. Women who had been carrying our congregation for decades, but who also had been raised in churches that told them they couldn't be ordained. And so every time I invited all the ordained folks up for the laying on of hands. Here are these women, who have given as much to the church as anyone. Who never got asked, because they'd never been asked before, and so nobody had ever noticed. And it was shocking to me that this church that was always looking under the sofa cushions for all the volunteers it could find. And here they were. And nobody would let them in.

Well, we let them in, finally. We just asked. And I imagine our question sounded a little bit like Jesus's. Do you wish to be made well? Do you wish to touch this water? Do you wish to have these hands laid upon you? And they were far too kind to tell us the honest answer. But of course the honest answer is: we've been ready the whole time. We've been here. Thirty-eight years by this pool. Thirty-eight generations in this church. We've been here the whole time. Are you ready? Are you ready to make room for somebody else at God's table? Are you ready to make room for somebody else in these waters of grace? Are you ready to broaden your understanding of who God calls and how Jesus works and how big and broad is the work of the Holy Spirit? Are you ready to let somebody else in? Jesus's question would be better asked of the people in the pool than it would the man at the edge. Do you wish to be made well, people of God? Then make room.

Of course, in the moments that follow, Jesus bids this man rise and walk, and he does. Jesus brings a healing to this story that the pool itself cannot provide. Jesus brings a healing that the people cannot provide. Jesus overcomes the exclusion and the division and the prejudice that have plagued this pool for nigh on these thirty-eight years, thanks be to God that he does. Thanks be to God that we don't have final say on who gets called and who gets chosen and who gets included. Nonetheless. Thirty-eight years is a long time. And how much more beautiful might it have been if the people of God had been healed a little sooner. So the question is, again, for us. Do we wish to be made well? Do we wish to be made whole? Do we wish to be made holy? Then we have to do the work of noticing. Who has been left out. Who has been excluded. Who has been set aside.

In just a few minutes once again we will here at UPC gather our incoming classes of elders and deacons down front and participate in the laying-on-of-hands. It's one of those moments in the church year that Zoom can't quite capture and I am so glad to be able that we can reclaim it here this morning, and particularly so with this amazing group of leaders you all have elected. It's a bit of a running joke, of course, that we invite forward ordained elders and deacons and then most of the congregation gets up out of their pews. But maybe that's exactly the way it should be. Maybe it should be, that the spirit has room for everybody. Maybe it should be, that the water has room for everybody. Maybe it should be, that this call has

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Preacher: Matt Gaventa

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room for everybody. Maybe that's exactly the way it should be, the whole church, all of us, here in the sanctuary, all of us, joining remotely, all of us, everyone here, everyone not here, everyone you see, everyone you don't see, all of us, gathered around the water together.

Do you wish to be made well, people of God? Then make room.

Thanks be to God.

Amen. Sermons are worship events, not written documents. Nevertheless, we try to make the text available for the purpose of sharing something of our Sunday worship with those who are not able to be in the pews. What you see here may not be finalized or appropriately formatted. References may be cited when applicable but may not be complete. You are free to share this transcription with others, but any reproduction of this content requires the permission of the preacher. Thank you.