

Revelation 21:10; 22:1-5 ~ John 5:1-9

Till Earth and Heaven Ring

6th Sunday of Easter ~ Memorial Day Weekend ~ May 26, 2019

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Introduction to Scripture:

The man in our story has no name. In the Bible this is your first clue that you are about to hear about someone on the margin. Likely even shunned or shamed for one reason or another: Someone otherwise ignored, invisible, unfixable. Except to Jesus. What made this man trapped in a body confined to a mat for 38 years a worthy candidate for Jesus' healing attention? This man had positioned himself within a few feet of the miraculous healing pool of water, but never able to access it on his own. This man did not ask to be healed. And when Jesus asks him, "Do you want to be made well?" The man's response cuts to the heart of what ails us. A condition Jesus won't wait another day to heal. Even if it is the sabbath.

Sermon:

"I have no one to help me." With no one to help him, the man was stuck, forever captive to a debilitating illness. A condition that stigmatized him and profiled him as someone unclean and sinful. It was believed that he or his parents must have done something wrong to be plagued with such a disability. No way out of that one. And apparently, he had no one. No one to help him.

This story calls to mind another story in our Bible about a paralyzed guy, also with no name but he had four friends. Each one taking a corner of his bed they set out to bring him to Jesus, but could not get him in the room where Jesus was teaching because the house was packed. Jesus was holding forth and all the seats were taken, even the door was blocked with people. They could not find a way to bring him in. Apparently, nobody was going to budge an inch. "Hey, this is my pew!" So, what did these friends do? Did they say, "Sorry, buddy, better luck tomorrow. We tried but we can't see a way in." Not hardly. These friends found another way. They went up on the roof and loosened a few tiles so they could lower their friend down to Jesus into the middle of the crowd. They were unstoppable in their effort simply to bring their impaired friend near Jesus.¹

The guy in our story today, had no one to help him. No one to help him gain access to the mystical whirlpool with healing power. The other paralyzed guy had four friends. Neither of these paralyzed men asked to be healed. Nor are we told any details about their faith or lack thereof. It was the faith of the four friends that astounded Jesus as he was lowered down through the roof and interrupted church, so to speak. In both cases, Jesus told the paralyzed men to "Stand up, take up your mat, and walk." And both men did. Jesus' healing word literally lifted them up, [that Greek word, *anastasis*, again standing up/resurrection], restoring them, healing them into wholeness. Men who had been otherwise considered unclean, suspect. Impure.

"Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?" This is the seventh ordination question in our Presbyterian *Book of Order* which is asked of elders, deacons, pastors before they can be ordained or installed. At our church officer training last Thursday

night, one of your recently elected officers wondered about the purity part. “Wait a minute, what are we promising here?” It was a great question and happens to connect to these healing stories and to the high vision of church we heard in our first scripture lesson, Revelation 22 . “The church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.” We are called to be the body of Christ on this earth.

How on earth do we do this? By, “participating in God’s mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, and lonely; to free people from sin, suffering and oppression...”ⁱⁱ Yes, even right in the middle of church. Or right on the way to church, as Jesus was that day he was heading to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival and noticed the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. Here’s the irony about the “purity” part: I believe that really embodying Christ, in the world, furthering the peace, unity and purity of the church is actually a call to get dirty. Like Jesus hanging out with the chronically ill at the pool of Beth-seza, the house of disgrace, literally in the Hebrew which also can mean the house of grace. Church happens when disgrace is transformed into grace. The purer, the truer we stay to Jesus’ call, the “dirtier” we will allow ourselves to get in fulfilling our mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, lonely, oppressed.

“I have no one to help me.” Yes, the man wanted to be made well. For a very long time. This man’s problem was something else: His problem was access. He was unable to gain access without help. Therefore, he was blocked, stuck. Both his lack of access and the shame locked of his chronic condition boxed him in with no way out. Being ill or impaired was thought to be a sign of sin in Jesus’ time. He was unclean, untouchable. However, Jesus’ reframes this misunderstanding, this misreading of illness.

True then and true now: Physical impairment is just part of having a body. Did you know that on average, Americans will spend eight years of their lives with some form of impairment? Our current cultural expectation of an illness-free, pain-free life fails to recognize what it means to be human. If you think about it, impairment, illness and pain (whether physical, mental, or spiritual) is the very condition we all share. Impairment is our common ground that cuts across the ways we divide ourselves. We all have unique and different forms of impairment at different times in different ways: but being impaired, experiencing pain is what it means to have a body.

I believe this holds true for our body politic, as well. On this Memorial Day weekend, especially I feel called to draw this connection. The current ills of our body politic did not begin two or ten years ago. You may recall that this holiday’s origins began after the end of the Civil War, fought over what has been called our country’s original sin of slavery. Did you know that it was freed slaves who made the first move that became this holiday? It was on May 1, 1865 freed slaves gathered in Charleston, South Carolina to commemorate the death of Union soldiers and the end of the American Civil War. It was three years later, when General John Logan issued a special order that May 30, 1868 be observed as Decoration Day, the first Memorial Day — a day set aside “for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet church-yard in the land.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We now remember and give thanks for all who have lost their lives in the line of military duty in all subsequent wars as well. Their sacrifice for the ideals of our democracy call us to continue to work to heal our body politic of its chronic impairment. President Lincoln in his second inaugural (March 4, 1865) address at the close of the Civil War spoke eloquently, using biblical language to express our democratic ideal: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

Our gospel story calls us consider the role of access in blocking the healing of our nation. Accessing our better angels, acknowledging our shared wounding and impairment is fertile soil on which to be Christ's body in the world today. Jesus lifted up the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years with his voice. Who are the people whom Jesus is calling us to lift up? People who want to be well, people who may have all but given up this hope because they lack access. Access to decent health care. Access to a good public education. Access to healthy food. Access to the voting booth. Access to the freedom and security we were born with and take for granted. Things we may think we have earned or deserve. That's not the message I read in our Bible. The operating instructions we find in our Book of Life call us to do otherwise. Jesus calls us to follow his lead: to do our best to listen to and to lift every voice. The voices of individuals in need in our community.

Here at FPC we are already on this path. In 2003 we moved our church to its current location and chose this design in order to offer better physical access for all into and around our church building. Our Parish Loan closet ministry, has grown in the past couple of years to help anyone in the Marshfield area who needs to borrow medical equipment (free of charge) like wheel chairs, shower chairs, and walkers. This is beautiful example of how we are already answering this call. Another access point we help with is food to hungry children right in our community. Partnering with the N.O.W. program, which feeds about 400 hungry children every weekend of the school year—gives them access to healthy food that leads to healthier bodies and minds able to do better in school because they are not hungry or worrying about what they will do when they get hungry.

The man in our story had no name. Not one that anyone ever knew. But God had a name for him. God claimed him. Jesus lifted him up, giving him access to healing and wholeness, just because he was God's child. That alone, made him a worthy candidate for Jesus healing attention and unconditional, non-transactional love. The man who had no one to help him that day in Jerusalem. What about us? We are here because we had someone to help us. Someone or several people lifted us up, helped us to gain access. Who was that for you? What host of heavenly and earthly angels have carried you to this day? Name them in your heart and give thanks. And let us give thanks for the nameless and countless people who have protected our precious country through its history. Let us honor God and God's beautiful creation by marching onward in the call to give access to others, helping them lift up their voice and sing, "till earth and heaven ring with the harmony of liberty."^{iv}

ⁱ This idea came from the sermon of Dr. Otis Moss, III, “Is it Too Early?,” preached May 14, 2019 at the Festival of Homiletics, Central Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN.

ⁱⁱ *Book of Order*, F-1.0302d

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.huggpost.com/entry/memorial-day-2012_b_1545507

^{iv} Text by James Weldon Johnson, to the hymn “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” *Glory to God*, (Westminster John Know Press: Louisville, KY, 2013), #339.