

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 29:13-14
SECOND LESSON: John 5: 1-13
May 29, 2022

“The Wrong Priorities”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Reading all the commentaries this week reminded me of why it is dangerous to text. The same words can be interpreted very differently depending upon the attitude read into them by the recipient. Some read this story and have no patience with this man whatsoever. He’s a slacker, making excuses for why he has not been healed, putting the responsibility on everyone else. He whines, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” He doesn’t even bother to learn Jesus’ name, and once he does, later in the story he rats him out to the authorities. He’s the most ungrateful healed person ever. OR, as others portray him, this poor man is a defeated and depressed individual who has given up. Having tried and tried for years he is just waiting for death. Weak and helpless, Jesus sees him and rescues him. Which kind of person we see probably depends upon our personal prejudices, but one thing is true regardless. This man did not seek Jesus out. He didn’t even know who Jesus was, and he didn’t ask to be healed.

Archaeologists located and excavated the area of the Sheep Gate and the pools of Bethesda in the early 1900s. It was dug out again in the late 20th century when they found the porticos. Two large reservoirs that collected rain water and possibly spring water were discovered which had been surrounded by covered porticos where people could gather. Apparently, the pools were thought to have healing powers. Pagans attributed this type of healing to the gods, and Jewish tradition said that every now and then an angel came and stirred the waters, and those who stepped in at that time were healed. Healings may have occurred here. The power of the mind to effect change is real.

Jesus would have known the type of people he would find in this place, and he must have deliberately chosen to go there. It was near the Temple, but not part of the Temple. The man Jesus approached had been sick for thirty-eight years. It doesn’t say he had been in that spot for thirty-eight years, just that whatever his condition was it had eaten up the better part of his life. We don’t know what this man’s medical situation was. It could have been any wasting disease like MS, tuberculosis, a parasitic or viral infection or some other chronic disabling disease. Whatever his condition was, he could not get up and walk to the water. He couldn’t even have gotten to the portico by himself. Friends or family would have had to have carried him there and left him.

We would imagine that Jesus would have entered a place with so much suffering and immediately started healing everyone. He did not do so. In fact, he was unrecognized when he was there. He appeared to be like any other pilgrim. But he noticed this man, and when he learned that he had been ill for so long he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” This is not as strange a question as we might think. The poor and disabled in this society often survived by begging. If this man was healed, he would lose that income stream. Furthermore, his whole identity had been shaped by his illness. Becoming well would bring with it an entirely new set of challenges. We cannot help someone who does not want to be helped. He could have refused Jesus. He could have been so proud that he was determined to find healing on his own terms. And when put on the spot the man did not actually answer Jesus directly. He said, “Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

At that point Jesus looked at him and said, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” Something must have come over this man at that moment. Some power must have infused him. He didn’t have faith in Jesus. He didn’t even know who Jesus was! But when this stranger told him to stand up, pick up his mat and walk, he did!

All of our human pre-requisites for healing go out the window in this person. And if we’re honest, these pre-requisites were developed in the first place to explain why people aren’t healed.

1. You have to have faith in Jesus.
2. You have to have A LOT of faith in Jesus.
3. You have to really, really want to be healed.
4. According to some, you have to “name it and claim it,” accept that you are healed with no evidence that you are healed. Act “as if” and you will be.

And of course, the assumption underlying all of these rationales is that if you are not healed, it’s your fault. People are really good at quoting “ask and you shall receive” while forgetting, “my grace is sufficient for you.”

This man did not have faith in Jesus. He didn’t even know Jesus. We don’t know if he really wanted to be healed. It looks like he had pretty much given up. He certainly did not “name it and claim it.” He didn’t stand up because he felt under pressure to act “as if.” He stood up because he was suddenly and dramatically healed. Strength came into his body and he knew he could stand up, so he did.

Of course, all of this took place on the Sabbath. The first five books of the bible, called the Law, are very vague on what constitutes work on the Sabbath. There are few details, and what is there generally involves commerce. Additionally, the prophet Jeremiah cautions against carrying burdens on the Sabbath, but we have no idea what constitutes a burden (Jeremiah 17:19–27) Where scripture was vague, the Pharisees stepped in with an entire set of guidelines that came to be the Mishnah. And this man was definitely breaking those rules. He was carrying his mat and they demanded to know why. And the only thing he could think to say was that he was carrying his mat because the man who healed him told him to. But he had no idea who that man was.

The authorities who confronted this man had the wrong priorities. Instead of rejoicing in a healing, they were more concerned that a rule had been broken. Instead of praising God they asserted that healing should not take place on the Sabbath because that constituted work. The law made allowances for trapped animals to be freed on the Sabbath, but these men believed that trapped humans could not be freed on the very same Sabbath.

We have the wrong priorities too. We would have walked right past this man. In our world he would have been one of the invisible and ignored chronically ill. A drain on the system, a non-contributing member of society, a burden, worthless. We wouldn't have seen him. **Jesus did.** We would set up all kinds of standards and expectations for someone to receive this kind of miraculous healing. **Jesus didn't.** We want to help only those we deem "deserving." Jesus had no such preconditions. Considering that God created the Law, God isn't very good at being legalistic! Instead grace always comes first. This man who had lost most of his life to a severe disability was healed. And along the way a few rules were broken, because Jesus knew that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.

This week has been another week of trauma for our nation. A town we never heard of before is headline news, Uvalde, Texas. And we are reminded again that the priorities of our society are not God's priorities. God saw every one of the children who were killed. They were not invisible. God saw the two teachers who lost their lives trying to defend them. And God saw a young man so tormented in spirit and soul that he turned his rage on the defenseless and committed the unthinkable. And God does not care one whit about our second amendment rights. The second amendment is not found in the bible. God says, "You shall not murder."

Speaking personally, I strongly suspect that the founders of this nation would be appalled by the way gun manufacturers have twisted the narrative for profit, selling assault weapons to an unsuspecting public. AR-15s are weapons of war designed to explode bodies. And this week one worked exactly as it was designed to work—on children. **We have lost our way.** But we also need to know that God loves even the tormented young man who committed this atrocity. And all of these people, children and adults, are now with a loving God, past all pain and fear. They are safe. It is for the survivors we must pray.

Until the 1970s shootings in this country were almost always personal in nature. Unless political terrorism was the objective, individuals did not commit mass murder of strangers. There was one school shooting in 1974 that fit the pattern of an alienated and angry loner. A 17-year-old armed with a rifle and a shotgun killed three adults and injured 11 others. But he didn't have an assault weapon, and if he had the results would have been far worse. Thirty-eight years ago, a man named James Huberty came into a crowded McDonalds in San Ysidro, California and proceeded to murder 21 people and wound 19 others before he was finally killed by the authorities. He had several semi-automatic weapons. His only reason was rage. He had left the house minutes earlier telling his wife he was going hunting for humans.

We have a serious, chronic, disabling condition in America. And so today we turn to Jesus who healed a man who had been disabled for 38 years, asking

that he heal our land of its violence and fear. We turn to God and ask for help. After trying and trying so many times for so many years many of us have lost hope that anything will change because our politicians are in the pocket of gun manufacturers. And the fact also remains that there are people among us so alienated from society, so damaged and enraged, that they would commit such evil. But Jesus can heal even chronic conditions. Jesus can change even that which seems impossible. We need God's help. We need God's wisdom. But by the grace of God, we can stand up, take our mat, and walk. Nothing is impossible for God. Let us seek God's way, and do God's will. Amen.

Isaiah 29:13-14

¹³ The Lord says:

“These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me

is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

¹⁴ Therefore once more I will astound these people
with wonder upon wonder;

the wisdom of the wise will perish,

the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

John 5: 1-13

⁵ Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” ⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”

¹¹ But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” ¹² So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?” ¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.