

## **Easter 6**

Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

John 5:1-9

### To Be Healed We Must Be Transformed

Today is one of those Sundays when the Lectionary provides the preacher options for the Gospel reading for the day. And I was so excited two-ish weeks ago to choose the reading we heard today. It's the reading on which I preached my senior sermon in seminary and — in as much as every preacher *really* has only one sermon we each preach over and over and over again, it is one of the texts that allows that message to sing. At least, that's how I experience it. Perhaps you will too.

And then the world moved on, as it does. Two massacres, one fueled by racism and the lies of white supremacy in Buffalo, NY and another in Laguna Woods, CA motivated by an ideology of cultural supremacy. The publicly expressed desire and intent on the part of the Supreme Court to roll back women's rights. And a government that refuses to unanimously support feeding this country's infants or affirm an anti-semitism referendum.

What am I supposed to do with that? How am I to bring you the Good Word of how this story of the paraplegic man at the pool of "Beth-zatha" is relevant to our lives today, in light of the current state of life in this world?

This is what I've got for you. This is what I know: we have gotten ourselves here. *WE*. The collective we, yes. But the thing about collectives is — as much as we might like to think of them as a whole entity unto themselves — they are made up of individuals. That is what a collective is. The Collective We is made up of a bunch of individual “we-s” — “you-s” and “me-s”.

We have gotten ourselves into this, but we cannot get ourselves out of it — or surely we would have — without God's help.

“Do you *want* to be made well? Do you actually *want* to have *life* and live it abundantly?” I hear Jesus asking the man. “You say this is why you have come to this pool which others say has healing water, but, for thirty-eight years you have not gotten into the pool. *Do you truly* desire to be healed? To have life which is different from that which you have now? Or...are you actually *more* committed to continuing to live this life you have always known?”

I have most often heard this story told with the persona of the gentle Jesus. The Jesus with a kindly face washed in soft glowing light, his arm extended in an open embrace, surrounded by children and cuddly animals. A Jesus who, essentially, *asks permission* from this man to miraculously heal his leg.

The Jesus we most often encounter in the Gospels is not this Jesus. In actuality, the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels most often is anything

but a soft and cuddly creature. That Jesus *is not* about smoothing over surfaces to make things appear clean and smooth.

On the contrary: when Jesus comes around, we can just about guarantee that the world as we knew it is going to get stirred up and turned over and broken apart!

This story of the man at the pool could have been written differently. It could have been told so that the man responded to Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" with an emphatic, determined plea, "Yes, Lord! The one thing I desire most is to be made well."

But that is not what we have.

In response to Jesus' question, "Do you *actually*, really, want to be made well?" perhaps then we are meant to hear the man's response as something more like, "Umm...well...you see...I...*EVERYONE ELSE* keeps getting in ahead of me. That's why I haven't gotten into the pool. It's *their* fault!"

If the author had recorded an expanded version of the story read *this* way, perhaps the man would have provided an account for his passed failed attempts at entering the water: perhaps it had been hot and sunny and the stones around the pool had become uncomfortably warm to the touch; another day it was too cool and the thought of getting wet when he was already chilled seemed counterintuitive; maybe it was too windy or too still (was that the water bubbling up or just the breeze?); perhaps his

tunic was too dirty and he didn't want to draw attention to himself, or perhaps it had just been laundered and jumping into a murky pool seemed to do a disservice to the hard work of removing all of that grime — the list could go on and on.

Read this way, what happens is something with which I am sure we are each all too familiar. The man doesn't answer Jesus' question — not directly, anyway. What he does do is throw up the well-known evasive maneuver of shifting the blame. He attempts to move the subject of the conversation away from himself and on to an amorphous, difficult to challenge, "other".

We've all done it. We've all seen and experienced others doing it. When we find ourselves feeling caught in a position of *unexpected vulnerability*, rather than face the fear of what seems like complete annihilation — that's what the voice inside our heads is trying to convince us of, we can so quickly find ourselves holding up a hastily built facade while trying to wiggle away un-noticed.

"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." ("I mean, *Hello!*") Jesus, not deterred by the man's feeble smokescreen, cuts right to the heart of the matter. "Stand up, take your mat, and walk."

And the man does.

This man, we are told, has been sitting on this mat by this pool for thirty-eight years. One day, a stranger walks up to him and tells him to get up, and walk. Oh, and “take your mat with you while you’re at it.” There was to be no trace left of the man’s former life. No placeholder that would allow him to unthinkingly step back into his former way of being.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I have received unsolicited advice from quite a few strangers on the streets of various cities. And, I don’t even need one hand to count how many times I have altered what *I* was doing to instead follow *their* directives.

But *I* haven’t been desperately waiting to hear the words *they spoke*.

How are you like the man by the pool? Where in your life are you seeking transformation? What is it that God could say or do that would shake you from your old life and cause you to pick up your mat and walk?

Anything?

Maybe the way God works in *your* life isn’t by air-dropping in a stranger to snap your mat out from under you.

Maybe the way God works in *your* life is through a guide. Your own personal guide who takes you by the hand and leads you to the water’s edge. “Just put your toes in.”, the guide says. “Whoa! That’s, umm, a little chilly, there.” you exclaim. Maybe your guide nods and continues down the river, leading you a little farther — up to your knees this time. “Hey!” you

think to yourself, “This is actually kind of fun! It’s like splashing around on the shore when I was a child.” Splish. Splash. Splash. Swoosh. Swoosh. Swoosh. “Yeah, okay. Hey, umm, Guide?”, you call, “The water’s getting a little deep here. ...*How* deep are we going to go? Up to my waist? ... Really? ... Umm ... Yeah. ... Yeah, that’s true: my feet are still on the bottom. Um, okay, but, you know, just to my waist. That’ll probably be good enough. ... Right??”

You continue to follow your guide, growing ever more trusting. A rock shifts underfoot, and you have momentary sense of panic, but then realize that your guide is still right there, keeping you safe. Phew. You feel the river bed shift beneath your feet a few more times, but each time you are startled a little less. And you feel more and more supported — buoyant, even. ... And then you realize, “...Hey! Wait! I’m not touching the bottom any more! This is *NOT COOL!* I can’t touch the bottom! I want out! OUT! Get me OUT!” Your guide leads you, spluttering and spitting to the shore. “I thought we were going for a nice walk along the beach! No one said anything about *swimming!* What are you trying to do, kill me!?”

Back on shore, you flop down in the sun to dry out. You hear a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of the trees along the river banks. Looking up, the world opens up before you as though for the first time. Following the path of the river you see the earth an all of creation springing to life. “How could this be the same river I waded into? I don’t remember seeing anything but rocks and sand ... and water ... so much water ... it was everywhere and when it lifted me up I thought I would surely die. So I swam for shore as hard as I could. And I kept willing for the beach to

come closer but it wouldn't. But my Guide led me out. And now, from here, I can see how the water gives life wherever it flows.”

Maybe you are like the man at the pool, perhaps unknowingly ready and waiting to jump at the opportunity for transformation. Or maybe you need to be coaxed into what turns out to be a wild ride with a surprise ending. And, maybe, you're somewhere in between. Or, maybe God has a *completely different* way of calling you deeper into life with Christ, into the perpetual cycle of living and dying and being reborn into a newer, closer friendship with God.

Change, whether desired or not, requires the death of one way of being in order that another may be given life. How is God, through Christ, presenting you with opportunities for new life? Will you jump to action? Will you follow God's lead into waters deep enough to swim in?

Amen.

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