

Sermon – Miracle at Sheep Gate

Scripture: John 5: 1-15

Sunday, January 28, 2018

Some of you may recall that from the end of October 2015 to June of 2016 I did a sermon series on the Gospel of John. I preached 30 sermons from John 1:1 to John chapter 5. Then something happened in my spirit and I could not continue the series. Instead I felt nudged to deal with different passages as God lead on a weekly basis. Today, at almost the end of January 2018 I want to once again pick up where we left off in John. Actually I am going to overlap a little bit and start at the top of chapter 5, the healing of the lame man. I intend to preach through John while taking breaks to deal with big issues or special holidays.

So let's get started. Before we get to our passage today Jesus has traveled to Samaria, where we encountered the woman at the well, he then traveled to Galilee where he heals the official's son at a distance. Today at the top of chapter 5, Jesus is back in Jerusalem for one of the Jewish Holy Days. Of course there were many places that Jesus could have visited while at Jerusalem. He could have hung out at the temple mostly, but Jesus makes it a point to visit the pool of Bethesda near the Sheep Gate. You need to know that this pool was not a pretty pool. This was a pool that has a live spring that would bubble up at periodic intervals. Now that part was really cool. But the locals were convinced that this pool was stirring because an angel was coming and whipping up the water. In fact they believed that the first one in after the angel stirred the water would be healed of their diseases. Naturally, at a time when no treatments of modern science existed and no Medicare or Obamacare was available, people would take any healthcare they could find even if it just a rumor. So you can imagine or maybe you cannot imagine what the place around pool would have been like. Think crowds like at a Royals game, but each person there not in Royals blue but it destitute grey, like a homeless person in

a developing country. Even worst, each person there would have all kinds of open wounds, all kinds of deformities and generally a lot of pain and suffering. Because many of these diseases would render these people to be spiritually unclean as well, you would not find any Rabbi's hanging out in a place like this because that risked them becoming spiritually unclean as well.

So now you have the description of just the kind of place that Jesus would make a point to spend some time in. And that is exactly what he does. And when surrounded by a crowd Jesus always has this knack of zooming in on the one person in that big crowd he wants to deal with. In this case his attention hones in on this man who was lame. What was special about this person is that he would be in a particularly hopeless situation because he could not move anywhere and did not have any friends to help him and that has got to be really sad in a place where the key to getting healed was being able to be the first one in the pool when the water stirred. The scripture says, Jesus knew just by looking at him that he was sick for a very long time. We know he was sick for 38 years.

So Jesus comes around to him and engages him in a way that would have taken him off guard. He asks him, "would you like to get well?" as the NLT puts it. Different translations do this differently but the Greek literally says, "are-you-willing-to-becoming-sound". Now you know why the English translators struggle to find a way to put this in English. But the question implies that for this man to become well, there is something that Jesus needs from him. A willingness on his part. This is consistent with the way God has been operating from the moment God created his precious human beings. He is always asking them to play a role in whatever he is doing. When God created the world, he asks human beings to be it's caretaker, when He dies on the cross for our sin, he asks us to be willing to admit our need for a savior and then receive the sacrifice and the Holy Spirit into their lives. When he presents the Good News of Salvation he asks us to be his messengers throughout the world. God is always co-opting us into his plans. And so here too Jesus looks at that man and says, "are you

willing to be healed and enter into a new life". Now you are thinking, healing sounds good, but sometimes the new life that comes with it may bring you enough anxiety that many people may choose to stay and suffer their present condition rather than be relieved of their suffering for the uncertainty of a new life. I remember leaving India and coming to the United States 18 years ago. Yes, the United States could offer a better life in general, but at that time I did not know it would be better for me, right? You can't know. Nobody can know what the future holds for them. And in a way it is good we don't know what is coming down the pike. But nevertheless uncertainty about the future keeps many people where they are. And Jesus does not want to push anybody into something they are not ready for. And so he asks this man, "are you ready to be healed?"

The man responds by explaining to Jesus why it was not possible for him to be healed. This man of course did not know who he was talking to. Jesus listens to him, and then simply speaks a new possibility into his life. "Stand up, pick up your mat and walk." And with those words, Jesus had instantly healed him, given him a task and opened his life to new possibilities. In fact this healing was not just like getting the flu being down for a few days and then getting healed and you go back to your regular routine. No this healing meant that everything changed in his life. This healing meant that he was not dependent on passerby's to move him from one location to the other any more, he could go where he wanted. That meant he did not have to beg for food anymore but he could go and find work. This meant he could be a whole member of society who had capacity to do things for himself, earn a living, get married and be part of society in a way that he would have never known before. You see the picture of life that Jesus opens for this man can only be described by the word "shalom". Shalom many people think is translated peace. Actually it is way more than peace, it is a complete picture of wholeness and wellbeing. Wellbeing in resources, in health, in relationships. By healing this lame man, Jesus was giving him a taste of shalom. Remember this is the same God

who created the Garden of Eden. He is being healed by the author of well being Himself. Jesus wants good things for this man's life. And so he speaks these words to him, "Rise up, pick up your mat and walk."

The problem is that this man is still living in a world that opposes Jesus in every way. And the irony was that the Jewish religious leaders had taken God's laws and added so many additional laws to it that it had become a big burden for people. So at the time of this incident, these religious leaders had made walking with a mat in hand on a Sabbath a sin because carrying something and walking outside the work was defined as work. So this poor man is healed and can now walk and runs straight into Jewish authorities. Bam. Now did Jesus not know that if he healed this man on the Sabbath he would be getting this man into trouble? Did he do it just to be a disrupter? Well, I can tell you one thing. Because of how corrupt the system had become, Jesus did intend to disrupt the system these religious authorities had created. That is why he drives out the money changes in the temple, right? He hated the religious corruption and came to break it all up and remake it. But Jesus did not heal on the Sabbath just to be a disrupter. Jesus healed on the Sabbath because healing was what the Sabbath was for. You see you work for 6 days and it creates this wear and tear on the body. So God said, I want you to take a rest on the 7th day so you can focus on God and renew your mind, body and spirit. That way you can go back to work with renewed energy and focus. Sabbath was also given to human beings as a foretaste of the eternal rest that God had planned for those who would eventually come to him. So in Jesus' mind, giving this lame man a healing in his body that would open him up to a beautiful new shalom was a perfectly appropriate and relevant Sabbath activity. On the other hand, for the Jewish leaders, they had seen their job as interpreting God's laws for the people. Now there is nothing inherently with that. Helping people understand God's Word is every preachers job. The problem comes when the interpretation of God's Word is used to grab power over people and exploit them as opposed to serving them. So these Jewish leaders interpreted the laws in such a

way that they could catch many people in sin as they defined it. That made them feel very self-righteous. It also made people come and make sacrifices at the temple. And every time they did that, the authorities would benefit from it. That was the intention. So one of the rules they had come out with was that you could walk up to 45 feet on the Sabbath as long as you are walking without your house. But if you were to walk outside carrying your mat, now that was sin. And they see this man happily carrying his mat and walking on a Holy Sabbath day. And they go ballistic, and confront him and say, hey dude, you are breaking the law, you are not allowed to carry your sleeping mat and walk on the Sabbath. They are the least bit interested in the fact that he his life has just been transformed by an amazing healing. They are also not at all concerns that as a homeless man he really does not have any place to store his mat safely like they have. And only thing they are interested in telling him is, “You are violating the law mister!”

Now the healed man in the face of this confrontation tells the religious authorities, “it was not my idea to walk with the mat, the man who healed me told me to do this”. Now the authorities are really upset, and ask him, “who told you to do such a thing?” To that, the man says, “I don’t know who healed me”. At this point the temple authorities, leave this man because their attention has moved to this mystery man that did this healing. They realize that they have bigger fish to fry.

Here the story takes a very unexpected turn. The text tells us, Jesus had disappeared into the crowd after he healed the lame man. Now shortly after this confrontation, when the man was sitting in the temple, Jesus finds him and tells him something that is kind of bone chilling, if you think of it. He tells him, “You have been made well, so now stop sinning or something even worse may happen to you”. Now when you read this, I am sure you are wondering what sin is Jesus talking about, right. Obviously it is not walking with the mat on the Sabbath. That was something that Jesus told him to do.

This is the focal point of this healing incident. This story is written in a way that you have to figuring it out. You have to read between the lines and carefully look at all elements. So let's do that. The first thing to see is, what does this man do after Jesus tells him to stop sinning. He goes and tells the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who healed him. He now knows who healed him. Why is this a big deal? It is a big deal because if rewind the story and go back to when Jesus first encounters the man, what do you think this man did after he was healed? He got up and went away and Jesus then went his way. Where have you seen this happen before? Remember the ten lepers who were healed? Of the 10 what did the 9 do? They turned away and walked into the sunset. Only one of them bothered to turn back to the healer to say thank you. Now if you don't bother to turn to the healer, you will never get to know your healer. Remember, Jesus does not just wave a wand and heal people from a safe distance. He always healed in a way that the people who he healed had an opportunity to know him. So the once lame man too like the 9 lepers in his excitement picks up his mat and walks away. So when he is asked who healed him, he has no idea.

But that is not where our story ends.

What we see here in the story is Jesus giving him a second chance. Once again he appears to this man and once again he is given an opportunity to get to know Jesus. This time the man at least gains an awareness of who healed him and he is able to go and testify to the temple authorities.

What is the message of his story for our own lives. I think this story has three takeaways for our life.

First, in the places of our life where we feel inadequate or stuck or need healing or growth, the question that God is asking you is the same that he asked the lame man, "Are you willing to be made whole again?" Remember, you can do all things through God who strengthens you. The real question is, are you willing? Are you willing to be

made whole again? Yes it might take you to a place of uncertainty, but don't worry about that uncertainty, the God who healed you will be with you through all your uncertainties as well. The first lesson for us is, if we are willing then our heavenly Father is willing to make us whole again in any aspect of our lives.

Second, there is no wholeness without a relationship with the healer and perfecter our faith. You cannot just get what you want and move on to do your own thing. It does not work that way. The world of shalom is ruled by Christ and if you want to experience the wholeness, then tied in with that wholeness is a deep relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ. The healing needs to go together with the relationship with Christ. If not the physical healing will do nothing for you.

The third implication for us is that, when you have a relationship, you don't keep it to yourself but you testify to that relationship. And testifying is tied to the lifestyle we choose to live. If our life is completely tied to ourselves we will not meet anybody we can share our relationship with Christ to. But if our lifestyle includes spending quality time loving those who do not know Christ, then we will have opportunity to share Christ with them as well.

Be willing to become whole, be willing to start a relationship with the One who healed you and finally be willing to testify to the healer and perfecter of your faith. There is a new life waiting for each of us. Let us all have the joy of entering it. Let us pray.