

Sermon on John Five 1-9

I struggle with what Bible stories like today's are telling me. In this story Jesus has returned to Jerusalem and he's by the pool of Bethzatha. It's a huge pool with five porticos. Legend has it that it has healing powers when the waters are bubbling and agitated by an angel. So we can understand why there are many blind, lame and paralyzed people lying around it waiting to get healed. There was a trick to it though—you had to be the first one in the pool to receive its healing power.

Now Jesus is looking around this pool and he sees a man who has been lying there crippled for 38 years. Jesus asks the man if he wants to get well. The man answers that he has no one to help him into the pool and when he tries to do it by himself someone else beats him to the healing waters. And here's the part where it's a good thing for all of us that I'm not God; because Jesus tells the man to pick up his mat and walk around and the man is healed. I would've asked the man why in 38 years he hadn't moved closer to the pool so he would eventually be the first one in!

So who is this guy? In many of the healing stories we hear Jesus tell the person that because of their faith they've been healed or because of the faith of their friends or loved ones. We'd like to read that into this story, but it just isn't there. There's no mention at all about his faith in anything except the healing power of the waters in the pool. If we were to read further into this story we'd find out that this man didn't even know who it was that had healed him. Then when he finds out that it's illegal on the Sabbath to be healed and carrying his mat

around; he spots Jesus in the crowd and points him out saying that Jesus had healed him and told him to carry his mat. It wasn't his fault, it was Jesus'! Out of all of the people lying in those porticos—this is the one who Jesus heals!

So who is this man? We would call him a bum! He has no gratitude, no faith, no humility, and no ambition. He didn't deserve to be healed; in fact he didn't deserve anything. He'd been on the welfare rolls for 38 years! He's who Michael Katz calls "the undeserving poor." This is how Michael describes the undeserving poor in his book, "From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare." "For the most part, Americans talk about the poor as them. Poor people usually remain outsiders, strangers to be pitied or despised, helped or punished, ignored or studied, but rarely full citizens. . . on the same terms as the rest of us." But you know what—that's who's lying down by the pool. That's who Jesus heals.

The last J-term I did while in seminary was the Urban Immersion where a group of us went to the inner city of Milwaukee to the churches and shelters there. At one of the churches the pastor told us the story of this young high school girl whose mother had died and now her aunt was raising her. The mother had worked hard so the daughter could focus on her schooling and get out of the poverty cycle. When the daughter went to live with her aunt; the aunt complained that the girl's mother hadn't taken the time to teach how to work the food pantry and free meal system that the churches and city provided. I remember thinking that the aunt had a big problem! But you know what—that's who Jesus heals down by the pool. Why? Why does this happen?

We find the answer in the message of this text. Jesus doesn't heal this man because of who the man is or what he has done. Jesus heals the man because of who Jesus is! This is God's grace; God's undeserved and unmerited love. This is the radical idea at the heart of Jesus' Gospel. That's how Jesus could teach us to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," not because of who they are but because of who we are as his disciples.

We talk a lot about the God's grace in church and that God loves us because of who God is, not because of who we are. We say that God loves in spite of who we are! And yet, when we talk about helping others, loving others as God has loved us, reaching out to those on the margins of society, doing something about poverty; we're really talking about helping the "deserving poor" those we call the "truly needy." So we pass laws that make it more and more difficult for those down by the poolside. The bottom line for our nation and often for our churches is we heal not because of who we are but because of who they are, not because we're called to be healers and instruments of God's grace as disciples of Jesus Christ, but because, and only if, they deserve to be healed.

I don't know about you, but I'm grateful everyday that God deals with me according to who God is and not according to who I am! I have no problem singing the hymn Amazing Grace; especially the first verse that says, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." Because when we think about it none of us is deserving of God's grace. None of us are worth Jesus being tortured and crucified on a cross for our forgiveness. But God loves each of us with an all encompassing, powerful love so that we are able to be called

children of God—even and I would say especially those who are down by the pool.

There's another fact that bothers me about this story, one that isn't readily noticed by we who don't know much about the Temple in Jerusalem. The pool in this story is in the shadow of the Temple, right in the shadow of the church. How many people do we know who have left the church for the pool? The Temple wanted nothing to do with the undeserving poor, so they went to the pool. So did Jesus. And that's where Jesus healed—down by the pool.