Trampled

A Meditation on John 5:1 – 9

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church May 26, 2019

Many of our friends are at the beach this weekend, or the lake or just hanging out at a pool. A pool. The man in our story is stretched out beside a pool as well. But he’s not there to sip a refreshing beverage with an umbrella in it. He is not going to do a cannonball off the diving board or slip down the water slide. He is there to wait for an angel.

Have you ever tried gazing at water for a long period of time? You better wear your sunglasses. Gazing out across the sand towards the mesmerizing waves of blues and greens is wonderfully relaxing…if all you are doing is watching for the sailboats to go by or hoping to see a school of dolphins. Staring into the water for 38 years while waiting for an angel can be a pretty hopeless and mind numbing exercise.

This is a heartbreaking story. I hear it and have this vision of a desperate crowd, all staring at the waters. Taking turns, sleeping and keeping watch. I see this man being crawled over, stepped on, by others, who also long to be the first into the water. It’s hard to blame them for stepping on him, for stepping over him. It would be hard to hold back and allow someone else to go first, not knowing if the opportunity to be healed will ever come again.

Legend attributes Einstein with having said that *Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.* We probably all would like to edit that sentence a bit, but we get the idea. We’ve been there; we’ve done that. We’ve written home about it. It goes hand in hand with one of my father’s favorite jokes, “Doctor, doctor, it hurts when I do this (jamming finger into eye)” “Then stop doing that!”

The unnamed man by this pool of miracles kept doing the same thing for 38 weary years in hopes of a new outcome, and like the persistent widow of the parable, he got what he wanted. But unlike the persistent widow, his answer didn’t come in the form he expected. It didn’t come through the waters of the pool, it came through the one who offered living water. He was consumed with the idea that the only possible way he could receive healing was through waters that had been stirred by an angel. Waters that had been “troubled,” “disturbed” by the hand of God. He was wrong.

I read an entire commentary on this passage that blamed the man for his severe lack of both imagination and gratitude. I don’t mean to deprive this man’s agency in the situation, but we know so little about him. We know he had been ill for 38 years and we know no one had helped him into the water. That’s all we know. Perhaps he is shy, meek, beaten down so low that he doesn’t even believe he is worthy of assistance, much less healing. We can see Jesus healing him, can’t we? Compassionate Jesus restoring him to life.

Maybe he’s just an ordinary Joe. Good days. Bad days. Sometimes generous with the hummus and other times keeping all the pita bread for himself. Sometimes happy to see someone else healed, and other times resentful or broken hearted. Someone just like you or I, waiting with our brokenness, hoping to be healed. “Stop here, Jesus, at my mat! I’ll be so grateful to you for the rest of my life!”

But let’s go to the other extreme…Maybe he was the most obnoxious man in that gathering of aching people. Maybe he taunted others and made offense remarks. Maybe he sang off key all day long just to drive people crazy. Maybe he smelled bad or was just generally hard to be around. We might feel a couple of different ways about that. Possibly, we would say, “Jesus, please heal this guy so we won’t have to listen to him anymore, look at him anymore.” More likely, we would say, “Jesus, walk on by! He doesn’t deserve you!” We categorize people. We qualify their lives based on whether we think they contribute to society or not.

The hard truth is that it would be God’s way to heal that obnoxious guy. That guy who doesn’t deserve a second chance at life. That guy who is the most in need of a second chance at life. He’s 38 years old. At least half of his years are gone – and his world has been so small. We forever think that God’s love must be earned. When we qualify who is good enough to deserve God’s love, we lose. Every time. Because none of us is good enough.

None of us is good enough AND yet that love walks right up and stands in front of us every day, and says, “Do you want to be healed? “ If the answer is “yes,” then get up! Get up. Walk. Dance. Run.”

This love is freely given.

It is freely given on our very best days. Those days when you went out of your way to be loving, while knowing there would be no prizes for doing so. Those days when you extended forgiveness instead of holding a grudge. Those days of infinite patience with little reward.

This love is freely given.

It is freely given on our worst days, too. On those days when you were impatient, rude, judgmental, unforgiving, arrogant, even cruel.

Freely given.

Freely given to obnoxious people, sarcastic people, saccharine sweet people and everyone in between. All across the board. Love freely given. Healing freely offered. To say “yes” to being healed, means experiencing the world differently, and that can be very frightening. While it must have been amazing for that man to take his first wobbly steps, he would see the world from up above instead of ground level. New things to see, new challenges to face. Saying “yes” requires courage and trust.

That’s the personal note in this story, but let’s take a step back and broaden our perspective.

Instead of viewing this man as one individual, what if we consider this man as representative of the paralysis of our culture, *a society in need of healing.* The paralysis could be defined in many ways: increasing economic disparity, weaknesses in our educational system, homelessness, infant mortality, affordable health care for all, political hostilities, the school to prison pipeline. Fill in the blank. We continue to stare at the same pool and wonder why healing has not come to us. That commentary I mentioned earlier, the one that disparaged a man who had been ill his entire life, made me think of the ways that we blame people without understanding their situations. We say, “well if they would just work harder,” or “well, if they would just get a better job,” to someone who would love to have a better job, to someone who would love to be free from pain and able to work. Too often we say that about someone who has not had educational opportunities, about someone who has been beaten to the pool every time the water has been stirred. Too often we say that about someone who has been trampled by the others racing to get to the healing waters. And we blame them for being in the way.

When we gather in this sanctuary, we acknowledge that we have experienced God’s love – through relationship, through prayer, through scripture, through music, through the compassion of others. We gather here as privileged people who have had the opportunity to experience God’s presence. As privileged people, we then carry the responsibility of helping our society find healing. And we better listen up - when the ones who have been trampled stand up and see the world around them from a new perspective they will name things we have refused to see. Together, we have a voice. Together we can speak up and say, “*That* pool is getting us nowhere.”

Jesus spoke time and time again about the “kingdom of heaven.” He taught his disciples to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” He spoke of a vision for people caring for one another instead of using one another. He spoke of people lifting one another up instead of trampling over one another. He spoke of people willing to see rather than turn their heads away. Jesus saw the injustices around him and modeled a different way of being. Fleshing out our faith in the public arena is one of the most powerful testimonies we can make to the power of God to transform the world.

But there is a sacrifice involved. To heal the world requires a commitment to change. It requires risk. It is often thankless work. After Jesus healed the man, he disappeared into the crowd. He didn’t wait around for thank you. There was more work to be done. More holy work to be done…on the Sabbath. What will you do today to bring God’s healing to the world? The possibilities are endless!