

May 1, 2016

On Missing the Point: A Brief Musing on John 5:1-16

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Sixth Sunday of Easter/Year C

Please pray with me. Oh Lord, please help me to do right by your Word in these next few minutes. Amen.

There's two things that jump out at me from the Gospel of John. One is that it insists, very loudly, that Jesus Christ is God. He wasn't just a good guy, or a great teacher, or a mighty prophet. Jesus was, and is, God, and the Gospel comes out swinging on this point from the first verse. Say it with me if you remember it: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Every speech that Jesus gives about himself, every object lesson in the book, points to the divinity of Jesus.

The other thing that this Gospel insists on is that belief in Jesus is what makes you a Christian, not adhering to a specific religious code. The great controversy of the early church, after all, was between those who believed that you had to be an observant Jew in order to be a good Christian, and those who believed that faith in Jesus was enough. Many in the church - especially among the Old Firm, the people who had actually been with Jesus, men like the Apostle James and sometimes Peter too - felt that faith in Jesus saved you from sin and its penalty of death, but you also needed to keep dietary laws, obey Sabbath observance, and be circumcised. And why not? Jesus was a rabbi, all his early followers and the vast majority of his audiences were fellow Jews, and his mission and message of redemption came to the Jewish people in the neighborhood of Jerusalem first. It seems natural that the Law that Jesus followed would have to apply to Jesus' followers.

The writer of John sees it differently, and this is the main reason this episode is so rough on what it calls 'the Jews.' When John was written at the turn of the second century by a Jewish convert to Christianity, the early church was really starting to differentiate itself from its parent faith. As the Gospel spread from "Jerusalem... even to the ends of the earth," more and more Gentiles believed and were baptized, as we saw with Lydia, a Greek merchant and "worshipper of God" who became the first European convert. And as Christianity spread ever further away from Jerusalem, the differences became more pronounced, especially as church leaders like Paul and Barnabas insisted that one need not adhere to the Law, since Christ's grace justifies us before God, and through incidents like Peter's vision of food in Acts 10, which taught him through the metaphor of breaking kosher not to see anyone as unclean. Paul's letter to the Galatians, which predates John by some fifty years, forcefully argues that Gentiles do not need to follow the Mosaic Law: "We ourselves are Jews by birth... yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the Law, but through faith in Jesus Christ," he says in Chapter 2. I don't read the Gospel's largely negative characterization as anti-Semitic. I see 'the Jews' here as stand-ins for Jewish Christians who insisted on obeying the Law - people who rejected Christ's grace because of their adherence to Judaism and dependence on the Law as their

justification before God - but I can't help but think this applies to us as well, especially when we reduce faith in Jesus to our adherence to the forms and rituals of Christianity. In this text, a miracle happens right in front of these Jews - these religious people - a man known to have been paralyzed for decades can now walk around - but they focus on his working during the Jewish day of rest, and wind up persecuting the one who healed him. Just as in the account of the blind man being healed in John Chapter 9, these religious people here miss the point, focusing on their religion so hard that they miss the miracles and become more hostile toward Christ.

That said, the setup of the encounter between this paralytic and Jesus comes across like an Iron-Age episode of MTV's 'Punk'd.' Jesus deliberately chooses to heal this man in a very public place, at what these religious people would perceive as the worst possible time: on the Sabbath, during a Jewish festival (which the Gospel writer doesn't bother to identify). The pools of Beth-Zatha were well-known at the time as an asclepion - a bath used for medicinal purposes. Evidence suggests that before that, and even after the Romans took it over, it was also used as a Jewish 'mikveh,' or ritual bath. You know, where you'd go to purify yourself on the Sabbath, or maybe during a high holy day. So Jesus goes to one of the few places in the city that's a target-rich environment of people with all kinds of physical disabilities, all wanting to be healed, that would also be chock-full of religious Jews who would be very offended at Jesus' breaking of the Sabbath by healing somebody. Jesus knows what will happen, predictable as the tide.

Interestingly, the name Beth-Zatha comes from the Hebrew/Aramaic 'beth hesda,' meaning 'House of Mercy' or 'House of Grace,' but the word 'hesda' could just as easily mean 'Disgrace.' And everybody got the double meaning. It was a place of 'disgrace' because there were so many really sick people - "blind, lame and paralyzed," says the decidedly non-PC text - that society would just as soon forget, and were traditionally seen as being at least partly to blame for their condition. All of whom hoped for the divine 'mercy' of a healing. But apparently, you had to work for that mercy. Later translators add in an explanatory story about an angel disturbing the waters at the end of verse 3 and into verse 4, so the first one into the pool after the waters were stirred got healed. As it seems in so much of life, grace there is 'first come, first served,' a reward for being determined and aggressive in that crowd of desperate, forgotten people. It's almost like a set of simple instructions for 'getting it right.' 1. Watch for stirring of water in pool; 2. Be first into pool. I can only imagine that this 'House of Grace' turned into a riot of shoving and elbowing as people fought to get the healing when the waters were stirred.

So Jesus comes to a sick man who hasn't been able to walk for thirty-eight years lying on his mat, hoping against hope for what amounted to two miracles: first, that somebody would help him down to the pool when there were so many others in competition for the divine favor, and second, for the miracle of the healing itself, that could cure him of his disability and help him be normal. And this is a serious thing too - in that time and under Jewish law, handicapped people were largely excluded from participating in religious ritual. There was a centuries-old tradition - started by King David, back in Second Samuel Chapter 5 - that, as the Contemporary English Version puts it, "only people who could walk and see were allowed in the Temple." Because this

man couldn't walk, he couldn't participate in Temple life, and therefore was excluded from a lot of Jewish social life.

So Jesus didn't just tap somebody at random for a blessing. This is somebody who had been burned by the way the system worked both in his daily life and in the place he thought he could be healed, and he was resigned to it. I hear the despair in his voice when he's asked the simple question, "Do you want to get well?" And the poor man's answer is telling: "No-one will help me down to the pool, and when I do get there, someone always gets there before me." Apparently it's not faith he lacks, otherwise, he'd leave the pool and just go begging. What he's lost is his hope, though... things have gone on the same way for so long in his life that the paralytic just stays at this so-called 'House of Grace' out of inertia. And I can relate. After a while, I guess you get used to it: your life gets into a rhythm, you're attending all the right meetings, you're on committee or Session or the board of a non profit. Sounds like everything must be OK, because you're doing everything right.

But Jesus doesn't work like that - grace here is as personal as a slap in the face. In the midst of all that despair, all that grinding same-old same-old, Jesus gives the man a command to do the impossible: "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." And immediately the man was cured, and he obeyed. Jesus singles out this forgotten man, and heals him, restoring his health and his hope all at once. No wonder the man jumped up and was off! And the best part? All the man had to do was obey. Not make a special sacrifice or one-two-three jump into a certain pool at a prearranged signal... just obey. Get up and walk.

What strikes me is that the crowd of other disabled people in Beth-Zatha apparently weren't aware of this happening right in their midst, otherwise Jesus would have been mobbed. Their attention was still directed at the pool; they were still focused on the hope offered by the traditional method of healing by following the instructions and 'getting it right,' so Jesus was able to fade into the crowd. Isn't that just so human? Even these people that had been forgotten by society and religion are locked into the same old patterns of 'if I do X, I'll get mercy.' In fact, the only way that anyone knew the man was healed was that he broke the rule of carrying a load on the Sabbath so publicly, since the city was full of observant Jews, none of whom were carrying anything - because Sabbath. I mean he goes out of the baths carrying his mat; it's only a matter of time until he runs into a group of religious people, and they immediately jump on him about it. Obedience to Jesus apparently includes irritating the religious people. They are more interested in finding out about Jesus because he told this man to disobey the Law than they are about Jesus' healing power. They're so focused on getting the forms of their faith right that they completely miss the miracle that happened right there in front of them.

But all this formerly ostracized man wants is to get back into the swing of life. It's like he's been in prison, and now he's out and trying to be a good citizen. So later, when Jesus finds the man in the Temple - remember, now that he can walk, he's allowed back in, so mission accomplished - Jesus admonishes him to stop sinning, "so that nothing worse happens to you." And of course

the healed man goes and tells the religious people that Jesus healed him, since now he is back in the religious club himself.

And later, when Jesus is harassed by the religious people, he confronts them by saying "My Father works on the Sabbath, and so do I." The funny thing here is that technically, Jesus himself hasn't worked at all - he only spoke to the man, telling him to grab his mat and walk; and there has always been an exception in the Talmud for doing good or saving a life. In fact, Mark Chapter 3 relates a similar story, where Jesus heals a man's withered hand at a synagogue on the Sabbath, and asks if it is "lawful to do good or do harm on the Sabbath - to save a life or to kill?" God is not limited by Mosaic Law; Jesus isn't either. Jesus doesn't let the religious observance stop him from dispensing healing and grace, and continues to do God's will in spite of the religious people.

I find it easy to relate to 'the Jews' in this story. Being religious is comforting, part of a supernatural social contract: God will be happy with me as long as I do all the right things at the right times. If I'm doing well, it's because I'm alright with God, because I'm doing what God wants. If something bad happens, I'm not feeling so holy, it was probably my fault - God is displeased with me, so I should change my behavior... and then God will be happy with me and the cycle starts again. Life is suffering, and religion is all about pain management; often I think that the pain and the guilt and the shame of all the bad things I've done and continue to do will go away as long as I appease the religion: go to church, put the right amount of money in the offering plate, hang out at the right meetings or bible studies or committees. The more I do this, the happier God will be with me and the more comfortable I'll be, world without end amen. It's tempting to think that a relationship with God can be that transactional.

But from what I read in this Gospel, that's not how God works. Grace comes when we least expect it, and usually when we're looking at something else. It can't be earned or bought with good behavior; it is freely given by God through Jesus. If you're only looking for God to move in your life on Sunday, you may well miss out on the grace that God is putting before you on Tuesday. God won't necessarily work in your life in this building on a Sunday or during a prayer meeting - God may choose to work through that guy in the SUV cutting you off on the way to work tomorrow, or through the doctor giving you the news later this week about the bloodwork you had done, or through your neighbor telling you about their sick child or broken marriage. God is not limited to our expected religious practice, and does not have to meet our expectations when manifesting in our lives.

Unfortunately, this may put you in confrontation with the people who are 'trying to get it right.' Like with this man's healing or the blind man's in Chapter 9 or the myriad other healings in Jesus' ministry, there will blowback from those who look at what you're doing and say 'you're doing it wrong.' I find myself falling into that trap as well: equating time spent volunteering at BUILD or money put into the offering plate with a good relationship with God, the quick grace I offer at the IHOP after I get my coffee (but before the big steak omelet arrives) standing in for honest prayer, comparing myself either with envy or disdain with others in the church that I see

as better or worse at outward piety than I am... or daring to preach a sermon without wearing a suit. But from this reading, the Christian life is not about getting all the bits to hang together just right, and I conclude that if I spend all my time getting my religious checkboxes correct, I may well miss out on the blessing and grace that is happening right under my nose.

So let me encourage us all to be open to what God might be trying to show us, and expect this to come from other-than-sanctioned sources. Remember that God's purpose may not be tidily wrapped up in a Scriptural bow or come to us in a Bible study, so don't sweat getting every procedure right. Just listen for God's grace in your life, and be ready to act on it.