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John 5:1-18

Ninth Message

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## DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?

SERIES: THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

*Playing for Time* was the title of the movie about Fanla Fenelon, who played in an orchestra made up of Jewish women inmates of Auschwitz. These women were spared from the gas chambers as long as they played well. Their lives were reduced to a single proposition: do well or die.

There are times in my Christian life when I feel like Fanla Fenelon. I think God has given me a very difficult instrument to play and he is watching my every move, listening to every sound, waiting for me to hit a sour note. At such times I feel my life is reduced to the same single proposition: do well or die. But, the Scriptures say, that is not so. Despite the miscues and the dissonant chords in my life, the untuned and the untunable nature of it, Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Certainly that is what we are learning as we follow the footsteps of Jesus in the gospel of John. We will discover this truth afresh this morning as we come to the story of the healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda.

It is true to say that the subject of the grace of God is highly unpopular in religious circles. Why is that, do you think? It is because to receive grace, one first has to admit need. Thus the fifth chapter of John marks a major division in this gospel. Up to this point we have been in Act 1, as it were, of the gospel. Here we have seen Jesus presented as the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Now we are entering Act 2, and the focus is on the persecution of Jesus by the Jews. Here it is quite evident that this grace of Jesus Christ, as we have seen it manifested throughout the first four chapters, is not always well received. Thus John begins to trace the movement that ultimately ended in the death of our Lord. What were up to this point the mere hesitations and reservations of the Jews concerning Jesus now change into the outright opposition and hostility that will culminate in his death.

The setting for this story is given in John 5:1-5:

After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep [gate] a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, [waiting for the moving of the waters; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.] And a certain man was there, who had been thirty-eight years in his sickness.

After his ministry in Galilee, Jesus went up to Jerusalem to attend an unspecified feast. No mention is made of the disciples, so he probably went alone. Sometime on the Sabbath day, he visited a pool located near the Sheep Gate (what is now called St. Stephen's Gate), located to the north of the Temple Mount. The pool of Bethesda was the Lourdes of its day: If you have ever visited a shrine, you can picture the scene here at the pool of Bethesda. The shrines and the holy places of the world are testimony to how easy it is to gather people to a site where a miracle is said to have occurred. Lourdes, in Southern France, has a spa which many believe has healing capacities. The shrine of Guadalupe in Mexico City has thousands of crutches stacked along its walls, left there by people have been healed in this special place where they believed they could receive a blessing from God.

The pool of Bethesda was, in a sense, a shrine. A subterranean spring occasionally caused the pool to ripple. Many years earlier, a sick person had been in the pool when it was rippling, and he concluded that he had been healed by the water. News of the healing spread throughout the city, and a legend was born. (That legend is recorded in 5:4. It is not included in most New Testaments because it was added by a scribe many years later to indicate how the legend came about.) The legend held that at certain seasons an angel of the Lord went down into the pool and stirred up the water, and the first person to enter into the pool after the stirring would be healed. The result was that hundreds of people from the countryside came to the pool, especially during feast days, hoping for a miracle. So many people began to come that five porticoes were built to shade the sick from the sun as they waited for the stirring of the waters.

What a pathetic sight this must have been. We read that there were not just a few sick people, but a multitude, probably hundreds. I am reminded of a scene from the movie *Gone With the Wind*. Scarlett O'Hara, who was serving as a volunteer nurse, enters the railway station in Atlanta and is overwhelmed by the agonized cries of the wounded Confederate soldiers surrounding her, a multitude for whom there is no painkilling medicine to ease their suffering. At first the camera angle shows Scarlett walking past a few soldiers, but then the camera slowly recedes to show a wider view, and Scarlett is lost in a sea of desperate and dying men, all crying out for help. That is the scene that greets Jesus as he quietly walks into the pool area, stopping to take in the full measure of a multitude of miseries, and then proceeding to the divine errand on which the Spirit is leading him.

Out of the entire multitude, Jesus' gaze is focused on this one man. Our Lord doesn't empty the five porches, healing everybody. He focuses on one man. It may be that this individual is one of the most destitute of all the sick and dying

present. He is weak, feeble, and unable to stand. And he has been in this condition for 38 years. It is likely that he was lying on the outskirts of the crowd, all alone, having been pushed away from the side of the pool by those who were attending other sick people, all of whom, of course, were jockeying as best they could to be near the water the next time it moved. Out of this crowd Jesus picks one man.

The value in this story lies not only in what it teaches us about who Jesus was—truth about the Lord himself—but also about how God responds to our own human helplessness and weakness. It was the helplessness of this man, I am convinced, that drew Jesus to him. Isn't it true to say that we can all see ourselves helpless and weak, crippled and lame, lying at the pool of Bethesda this morning? We all need help. We all find ourselves paralyzed, unable to do the things we want or ought to do. We are lame. We do not walk very well spiritually. This is why we see in this encounter the response of God's heart to our own weakened condition.

John goes on to say what Jesus did.

**When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time [in that condition], He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?"**

What a strange question to ask of a man who had been sick for 38 years! When you deal with people, there are some questions you just don't ask. I certainly would never ask this of someone in the hospital. If you see a car stalled by the side of the road and someone is leaning under the hood, you don't ask, "Is there something wrong with your car?" You are liable to hear in reply, "No, I'm under here hugging my carburetor," or something worse.

"Do you wish to get well?" asked Jesus of this man. But, in Jesus' case, this is quite an appropriate question, for he never asked foolish questions. Healing would result in radical changes in this man's life. He had probably been able to support himself as a beggar. If he were healed, it would in all likelihood mean that he would have to support himself. People who have been in the same hopeless condition for a long time sometimes want sympathy more than healing. I know people who don't want to be healed because they don't want to assume responsibility for their own lives. They have grown accustomed to the attention they get as a result of their helplessness.

I have shared with you during the last couple of weeks a little of my own journey. Many times during the past 18 months the Lord has directed to me the same question that he asked the man by the pool at Bethesda. I have to admit I have spent more time in my Christian life desiring to be right than desiring to be well. But maintaining a feeling of rightness takes a tremendous toll on a life—and on a family as well. Justifying oneself, trying to look good, trying to be right all the time takes a lot of emotional energy. For a long time I thought I wanted to be well, but looking back, I now see what I really wanted was for everyone around me to be healed so that they could meet my needs and I could feel good about myself. I remember sitting in a counselor's office sharing my desires to deal with those areas that have kept me from being the man I knew God wanted me to be. I expected some wonderfully affirming comment in return,

but I didn't get it. My counselor looked at me and said, "We'll see, won't we?"

Franz Kafka, in his book *The Trial*, tells the story of a man who is living in a police state and he is told he is going to be brought to trial by the state. He goes from bureau to bureau, office to office, trying to find out what the charges are. Unable to learn the nature of his crimes, he spends his entire life building a defense against any and every possible charge.

This is the response of the man at the pool of Bethesda. When you live that way, it's hard to listen. You can't listen, really, because you are self-consumed. The man doesn't really hear Jesus' question. It only needs a simple yes or no answer, but instead he tells the sad story of his disappointment with the pool.

**The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me."**

Here is a portrait of a depressed and discouraged man. He is so completely captive to his negative feelings about his circumstances that he is unable to hear a new question. The man had an explanation that he had perhaps given over and over again. This is why he answers as if Jesus had asked the question, "Why are you here?" His answer is a complaint about the injustice of the system which has kept him from entering the pool all these years. Had Jesus not interrupted him, his next comment might be to the effect that Jesus try to talk the parks and recreation department into putting in place a numbering system, so that people like him who had no friends might have a chance at getting into the pool when the waters were stirred. He compares his own lameness with the lesser ills of those who could still walk, and he always comes up short. I am sure that is one reason he was still so sick, because that perspective leads to one thing, and that is bitterness. Once a root of bitterness is established in our hearts it grows like ivy, covering all the windows. We ourselves become darkened in that bitter world where it's always "me against the world." This perspective, this sin, had been secretly coddled and nurtured in this man's heart over a long period of time. We could summarize his life in three statements: "Why me?," "Poor me!" and, "Why not him?"

But Jesus interrupts this spiral of self-pity and hopelessness with a sharp command. Notice his response to this man who had lost all hope. Our Lord takes the situation totally in hand:

**Jesus said to him, "Arise, take up your pallet, and walk." And immediately the man became well, and took up his pallet and [began] to walk.**

The power of Jesus' words alone brought new life and vigor to his limbs, strengthening them and completely healing them of a 38-year malady. If you have ever had a leg in a cast, you will know that the muscles atrophy after six weeks of inactivity. Imagine the atrophy after 38 years of inactivity. What an amazing, instantaneous change! It must have taken his breath away. If 38 years says something of the seriousness of the disease that this man suffered from, then picking up his bed and walking tells us about the completeness of the cure that this miracle effected.

Here we see the authority and love of Jesus in a setting different from we have seen so far. No request is made of him. In fact, there is hardly any dialogue at all. Later in the passage we discover that the man doesn't even know who Jesus is. Here we have the intervention of Jesus into the life of a man who is so dulled by disappointment that he cannot even respond to a simple question about the possibility of help for his situation. What a contrast between this man and the official from Capernaum!

We see from that contrast that it takes more emotional strength to ask for help than to tell about the impossibility of help. Someone can be so fatigued and emotionally defeated they can't even risk saying, "Yes, I want to be well." Does this describe your situation this morning? If it does, the beauty and wonder of this story is that Jesus is able to heal you. His grace was good enough and strong enough to find the man by the pool at Bethesda. This isn't a search of faith like we witnessed last week in the story of the official from Capernaum. It is a search of grace. Jesus is able to find us where we are. He finds the woman at the well. He finds this lonely man, lying among hundreds of others, at the pool of Bethesda. And he heals him solely because of his own decision. I remember Paul's words in Ephesians 2, that "we were dead in our transgressions and sins, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. *But God*, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love for us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved." *But God . . .*

The man doesn't even know Jesus' name. What a demonstration of the grace of God!

In verses 10-18 we learn the immediate reaction of others to this miraculous event. John notes,

**Now it was the Sabbath on that day.**

John briefly mentions that the healing took place on the Sabbath, setting the stage for the confrontation and discourse that will follow (which we will look at next week).

Therefore the Jews were saying to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Take up your pallet and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up [your pallet], and walk?'" But he who was healed did not know who it was; for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in [that] place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you." The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. And for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

Following the healing, everything becomes very complicated. Now the man is in trouble because of Sabbath restrictions—a law he probably never worried about before. The Law of Moses said that the Jews were to keep the Sabbath and not do any work on that day. The rabbis studied that regulation and came up with 39 different ways by which that day could be violated by certain types of work. One of those had to do with carrying any kind of load on the Sabbath. Jeremiah 17 warns not to bring any burdens out of houses on the Sabbath day. Though the restriction may have honorable in its intent, we discern the real motive in the response of the Jews to the man's statement. You would think their reaction would be, "What? Somebody healed you? Who is the one who healed you?" But instead it is, "Who is the person who told you to disobey one of our regulations?" Their religious bigotry is intent on keeping the letter of the law, but it is totally unconcerned about the mercy of God. This was the first true Sabbath this man known for a long time; he was finally free from the burdens he had labored under for 38 years.

Jesus' explanation, which we will examine next week, is this: "God is at work. God is doing this. The merciful and compassionate God who sustains the universe has found this man. He is working and I am his instrument. That is why I am doing this."

The secret of meaning in Jesus' life, and in any life, is to find out what God is doing and to work with him. What Jesus said is true today. God is working. He is working in international events. He is working in the pressures and problems in our lives. What you need to discover is where God is working in your life and cooperate with him. Allow him access. Be his instrument. The only thing that lasts, that only thing that brings significance to life—and everyone of us wants to be significant—is to be in line with what God is doing. This is what made our our High Schoolers' trip to Mexico so special: they saw God work both in and through them.

What a powerful illustration of the grace of God we have in this story! This man had been sick for 38 years. And his sickness, I believe, was a result of his own sin. Though all sickness is not the result of sin, as we will learn from Jesus later in chapter 9, sometimes it is. This is why Jesus warns the man to stop sinning (v.14). We don't know what sin he was referring to. Perhaps it was a bitter spirit that sapped all the energy and life from this man's body and turned him into an invalid. He tries to avoid a conflict by blaming the one who has healed him. He is so dull he hasn't even discovered his benefactor's name! And once he discovers what it is, he reports it to the authorities. Yet, in spite of all this, Jesus chose to heal him.

I identify with this man more than I do with the official from Capernaum. When I look at the inconsistencies of my life and my ungratefulness, I wonder why God doesn't give up on me. William Beveridge, who was a preacher, wrote something that I feel deeply about my own life:

*I cannot pray, except I sin;  
I cannot preach, but I sin;  
I cannot administer or receive communion, but I sin.  
My very repentance needs to be repented of;  
And the tears I shed need washing in the blood of Christ.*

Despite all our best intentions to live rightly, we fail. If the proposition is, "Do right or die," we are all in deep trouble. We have gone very wrong. Knowing this, we may have trouble believing that God can love the likes of us, but he does. At times like this we would do well to remember the words of the psalmist,

*The LORD is compassionate and gracious,  
Slow to anger, abounding in love.  
He will not always accuse,  
Nor will he harbor his anger forever;  
He does not treat us as our sins deserve  
Or repay us according to our iniquities. (Psalm 103:8-10)*

God suffers fools gladly! And he has compassion on those who fear him. Even if we are on the run, trying to get away from him, he is always in pursuit of us. Those footsteps we hear behind us are his, and he is gaining on us. Though we take flight, he will pursue us with his love. He is the "hound of heaven," as Francis Thompson wrote:

*I fled him down the nights and down the days;  
I fled down the arches of the years;  
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears  
I hid from him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed slopes I sped, and shot precipitated  
Down titanic gloom of chasamed fears,  
From those strong feet that followed, followed after . . .*

God stays with us to the end. He is not put off by false starts or sour notes. He is the God of the hard case, the difficult temperament, the unfit and the misfit. With him, no failure is final. He is the God of the second chance. He pursued us to a hill, and there, between two criminals, he paid our dues, bore our sin, and died our death, so that we could know life and love.

*Amazing love, how can it be,  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me.*

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