

“Long Time John”
John 5:1-9
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In John 5 we find Jesus in Jerusalem because of a festival of the Jews. He passes the pool of Bethzatha and stops. Jesus knows about this place. It is like an outdoor hospital without any physicians or nurses or orderly, just patients and their families. Hundreds of sick people would come every day. Some were permanent residents of the five porticos surrounding the pool. The pool itself was the size of Sanford Stadium. It is one of the places described in the Bible that you can see today. The pool was discovered by archeologists in the 19th century and excavated extensively in the 20th century. I saw it in 1998, it is near St. Ann’s Church not far from Temple Mount. It is trapezoidal in form about 165 by 220 ft. wide and 315 ft. long. The story was that an angel would come periodically and stir the waters of the pool, and the first person in after the stirring would be healed. Sounds incredible, doesn’t it? Only those who were sick saw this as a last resort for healing.

See that man over there in the corner? That is “Long Time John.” He has been sitting around this pool longer than anyone else. He’s been here for thirty-eight years. Jesus stops and asks him, “Hey Long Time John, do you want to be whole?” What a stupid question, right? Do you want to be whole, Long Time John? “Do you want to be like you were at 21, Long Time John?” Do you want all of your capacities back, John?

You and I have seen that, haven’t we ... people who have been down and out so long that they don’t mind being down anymore. It has become a way of life; it’s the way they deal with the world. “Long Time John’s” brother came to see me not long ago. He had been thrown out of an empty building and he needed a place to stay. He liked being down; didn’t want to get back up ... just needed a place to stay today ... tomorrow would take care of tomorrow, thank you. When another staff member tried to help him see past today he said, “Reverend, I just need a little help with today is all.”

You see “Long Time John” hated being sick, but the thought of being well scared him even more. It scared him into being sick some more. So, when Jesus asked him, “Do you want to be whole?” He said to Jesus, “Hey, how you doing Jesus. Man, I just don’t have anyone to help me down to the water’s edge to get cured. Every time I start, someone else beats me to the water. It is tough out here ... younger folk coming in every day ... have to fight just to keep my spot back here ... see I am so far back here in the corner ... great spot out of the sun, but not so good for finding the water.”

Jesus knew he was being scammed. You mean “Long Time John” that you don’t have anyone to help you? What about your spouse “Long Time. What about your children? Surely they could knock people out of the way. Long Time I know you have a couple friends who have really made it big in business. Why haven’t they come down here and thrown a little cash around to

guarantee you a great spot right on the edge of the pool? Doesn't seniority count for anything around here, Long Time?"

Now, let's pull back away from the story for a minute and see what we have here. You know there has got to be something wrong with the system at the pool of Bethzatha? I mean, a system where only one person gets healed and everyone else just gets wet? Would you and I put up with a system where there is only one winner? But "Long Time John" and the others put up with it because they got a kick-back from the system. "Long Time" made more out of the system as a sick man than he ever would as a well man. He sat back in the corner and told his story and got rewarded for it. People would throw him some money, would pay him to pose for pictures; maybe even some of the other patients gave him some of their money since he could never make it to the water's edge ... lessening the competition. "Long Time John" was better off partially whole than being really whole.

There is a lot to be said for the porches at Bethzatha. In time, one became accustomed to that way of putting in the days. It was not unpleasant to lie there in the shadows, in the coolness, while hearty men and women, poor unfortunates, were toiling and perspiring out in the heat and the glare. A lot could be said for his life style and reasoning, but Jesus does not bring up any of it. Perhaps he moved in a step closer and asked a second time, "Do you want to be healed?"

This is a good story, it can bring us hope, if we allow it. The man had lost all hope as he lay there. Every day he watched someone else jump into the pool and go away a new person. As the weeks and months and years begin to add up, "Long Time John" knows that there is nothing but more of the same in line for him. His wanting to believe is squeezed out of him inch by inch, and after awhile there is nothing left but a dull daily routine. And then Jesus is standing in front of "Long Time John" with a hard question, "Do you want to be healed." After all of these years of waiting and hopelessness—now comes the supreme moment. No one had talked to him in years like this, and again there was the possibility of something new, of hope, there just might be something more to this life than lying and waiting.

Winston Churchill wrote, "we shape our dwellings and afterwards our dwellings shape us." We decide what we want from life, and then as Browning said, "Life gives it back to us, just as we ask for it." That is until Jesus says, "Rise up, take up your bed and walk." Rise, go with the new hope he brings us.

The story brings us face to face with our wholeness as a person. Do you really want to be healed? The question makes us face the fact of our incompleteness outside of the presence of Jesus Christ; that as God created us as whole and perfect, just a little less than the angels, so we mess it all up. St. Augustine struggled all his life with this paradox, "That the life to which he was accustomed held him more; than the life for which he longed."

Now we can be complete again by responding affirmatively to the question of Jesus. I don't mean as Bonhoeffer called it, a "cheap grace" where we enjoy all the benefits of Christianity but none of the responsibilities but responding with the understanding that through our personal and corporate life, we might have to give up things we cherish.

“Long Time John” had an ailment that all could see. Sometimes our ailments are not so visible. Whatever it is that keeps us from being whole can be reconciled right here in this church. There is a mighty power, the stirring of angels moving through these walls and corridors of this church. It is the words and deeds of those who have preceded us. Women and men, old and young, who have fought the good fight, kept the faith and are now pleading with us to join them. They are saying along with Jesus, “Hey Christian do you want to be whole?”

Jesus said to “Long Time John,” “get up and walk.” Something he could not have done five minutes before became possible. Looking at Christ somehow helps us to do what we had failed in the past. We can now be what we could have never been, can master what has consistently baffled us, can reach and grasp, grip and hold, and use what had utterly been beyond us. Isn’t that what the church is all about? A place where people can gather so God can bless them? It’s what the church of Jesus was about—all those poor vagabond followers he gathered around him. It’s what the church at Corinth was about, if we can tell anything from Paul’s letters to them.

The church is not a society of the perfect and the well rounded. It is like one of those wards you see in a World War I hospital movie, filled with the walking wounded and the desperately dying.

That is what makes our fellowship in the church special. It is not based on our merit. It is based on God’s merit. We come here, don’t we in order to hear Jesus say, “Take up your mat and walk, because you can do it now.”

If I asked some of you to stand up and give a testimony, or tell your stories, we would have one woman saying, “I came here when I was feeling rotten about myself because of a broken marriage and troubles with my children. I was as low as I could get, but something happened here, and I began the road to a new life.

Here would be a man confessing, “I started going to church again when I had lost my job and didn’t know where to turn. I found the faith here to go back out and try again, and to keep trying until things began to go the other way for me.

Here would be a young person saying, “I only began to get serious about religion when I was feeling bad about myself and confused about my future. What I found here taught me a lot about who I am in the plan of God and what I want to do with my life.

“Long Time John had been visiting the pool of Bethzatha for a long time, thirty-eight years is a long time. Some of you have been coming to this church for a long time, but you have never gotten into the water either. You have been watching other people go from limping to leaping, but you haven’t been able to get in for yourself. Maybe this is the season of your life when you need to consider getting into the water, if something has been holding you back. There is a pastoral transition coming for this congregation. There will be some new opportunities this fall gathering information about who you are as a congregation and what the future holds. Lots of hands will be needed to help with that and other things. One of these new opportunities may be a leaping into the water one for you. I invite you to consider getting into the water. If you need

something new for your life, I would invite you to get into the water. It's time to stop limping and start your leaping.

Maybe this late spring and through the summer you could pray this prayer of trust to God and turn your life situation over to him. You could say, "God, I have been limping around here for a long time and I haven't gotten any better. Won't you please touch the waters of my life and help me to start leaping?" For your sake and with help from God, I hope you will pray that prayer. You can do it, really you can, "God I have been limping around here for a long time and I haven't gotten any better. Won't you please touch the waters of my life and help me to start leaping?"