

Down by the Poolside

Psalm 67; John 5:1-9

Reverend Anne Benefield

Geneva Presbyterian Church, May 1, 2016

Introduction: It would be really nice to have some good luck, wouldn't it? A lot of times we feel "Life isn't fair." or "I deserve better!" I remember when Johnny went through his, "It isn't fair" stage. I'm hoping it will be over by the time he graduates from college. Well, today's story is about one man having a hugely wonderful break when he meets Jesus. The story is found in the Gospel of John who tells of only a few miracles, which makes this story one to be treasured.

John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed, [waiting for stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring up the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.] ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" ⁷The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." ⁸Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." ⁹At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath.

Prayer: Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our thoughts be acceptable in Thy sight. Amen.

Last week in talking about Earth Day, Rosie Perthel made water her theme. Seven hundred eighty-three million people in the world do not have clean water. Imagine that! More than twice the population of the United States doesn't have water to drink. As Christians, water seems central to our mission. In Jesus we experience living waters. I believe we should be sharing not just the spiritual living waters, but also the physical living waters. If you are interested in finding ways to help get clean living water to people around the world, you can Google the Presbyterian Church (USA) and search for water. The second suggestion has an article about an organization called "Living Waters for the World."

You know that I belong to the service organization Rotary and my club has supported the digging of five wells in Togo. Clean water may become the greatest issue in the world as climate change makes weather patterns change.

Let me get directly to our scripture today, remembering that sharing living water is central to our mission as Christians.

There are some churches that have baptism fonts with water flowing through a stream, constantly moving. The fonts have a dramatic effect in the sanctuaries because you hear trickling water throughout the service. Beneath prayer and words of praise, there is the refreshing music of water. You might get used to it and stop hearing it, but once there is silence in the service the lovely sound of bubbling water touches our ears.

Once I was asked to do a baptism on a retreat. The request came from a man of 71 who had been a Christian for many years, but had not felt ready to be baptized. As I talked to him, I suggested that we do the baptism during the Sunday morning service at the outdoor chapel in the woods. He thought that was a good idea, but wondered where we'd get the water. I said we'd get it from the creek near the chapel. He looked confused and asked what creek? I said that I had never seen the creek, but I had heard it so I was sure it was there. We went down and easily found the creek by listening for the sound of trickling water.

Behind so many of its scenes in the Gospel of John you hear the play of water: the Baptizer's river, the six stone jars full, the waters of birth, the well at Samaria, the stormy sea, the washing of blind eyes, the washing of dirty feet, and the water in this story.

In an article for *Review and Expositor* 85:539, summer 1988, Paul D. Duck writes,

In today's story, a man lies atrophied beside a pool of water that may have healed others but cannot heal him...He lies beside the waters of false promise and of endless, empty waiting...The miracle of healing at the pool of Bethzatha is a miracle only for the few, for the enterprising and the early...For this reason, the pool of Bethzatha is finally a cruel place. It is a system of competitive healing. The quick and the aggressive are served by the promise. The very weak are simultaneously lured and excluded. This system guarantees the perpetual stirring of their hopes and the perpetual denial of their need. These waters have cried, "Here is healing for the broken." But again and again, those who are profoundly broken strain toward the healing while those who are less broken seize it in their stead.

At a profound level, I think this promise of healing mirrors our cultural longing for healing today. We hear and read and accept commercial promises for improving and curing ourselves. We buy the teeth whitening strips. We believe that having the right hair color will change our lives. We pay for the newest medicine that promises healing except, of course, for the exceptions that include death as a risk. So we come poolside hoping for a miraculous cure, but we will be disappointed unless Jesus comes.

And Jesus does come to the poolside. He had come to Jerusalem for the feast, but instead of being at the temple He is here, walking among the sick and gaunt faces. Which leads to the first question I want to explore today: where do we find Jesus?

All of us struggle at times because we feel separated from God. Often that happens when things go wrong. At least part of our problem at times like that is that we don't look

for Jesus in the right places. Surely Jesus is here in our worship, but we only spend a couple of hours here each week.

Notice where Jesus is in this story; He isn't in the Temple, He is among the sick. If we want to experience Jesus' presence, we have to go to the places where He is – working on the streets, in the shelters, hospitals, prisons, welfare offices, among the downtrodden. We meet Jesus at the Lord's Table making a healthy meal for hungry, homeless people.

When you talk to the Geneva people who go to the Lord's Table, they always say it is fun, not work, fun. When we are engaged in the work of the Lord, we find joy.

The second question is “When are we most opened to Christ?” I believe we open ourselves most often when we suffer. When things are going well, we don't think we need Jesus. It is only when we are in trouble that we open ourselves to God, and we're usually angry at God for the situation we're in. Thankfully, God doesn't hold grudges.

Let's look back at the story. The lame man has been sitting by the poolside for 38 years. Do you think he is thinking good thoughts about God? I don't think so. I think he thinks God abandoned him years ago. Think about it this way: He has been at that pool since before Jesus was born, since before Jesus visited the Temple when He was 12, and since before Jesus' ministry began. This man has spent his entire life hoping and waiting to be healed and it has not happened.

Have you ever waited and hoped for healing in one part of your life or another for years without a resolution? I have three big areas in my life where I have been waiting, hoping, and praying for healing – for years. I'm always trying to fix these things, and even though they have not been healed, I have been healed by the presence of Christ. I know I am not alone. And I know that there is much to learn in my suffering.

Katie Harris told me about a commercial she heard on the radio. She wasn't positive about the phrasing, but in essence it was, “Find the blessing in your challenges.” There are blessings in our disappointments, our failures, our bad luck. Finding them is the goal.

Did you notice in the story that Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be healed? The man didn't really answer the question. Instead, he talked about how he hadn't been able to get to the pool in time for healing. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “A familiar captivity is frequently more desirable than an unfamiliar freedom.”

Sometimes we actually hold on to our problems because we know exactly what is going to happen and that is easier than not knowing what will happen.

In the fall we talked about “impossible dreams,” doing things that on the surface seemed impossible. A few weeks ago, I included a copy of the different suggested activities and people who signed up for them. In the coming weeks, I hope we will start working on those “impossible dreams,” stepping away from our inclination to give up on anything that is hard.

We are in the middle of a strident political season. There is too much anger and fear. There have been moments of violence. But there is one thing you can say about the candidates: Each of them is committed. We, too, at Geneva are committed. We have found places like the Lord's Table where we meet Christ. We have come to realize that we learn the most in our failures and heartaches. And finally, we are learning to share in the healing of Jesus.

Last year, Nicholas Kristof, an op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* wrote a column in March 2015 entitled, "A Little Respect for Dr. Foster." Kristof makes clear that he isn't an evangelical Christian yet he says, "But I've been truly awed by those I've seen in so many remote places, combating illiteracy and warlords, famine and disease, humbly struggling to do the Lord's work as they see it ... " He writes about:

"Dr. Stephen Foster, 65, a white-haired missionary surgeon who has lived in Angola for 37 years—much of that in a period when the Angolan regime was Marxist and hostile to Christians."

"We were granted visas," [Foster] said, "by the very people who would tell us publicly, 'your churches are going to disappear in 20 years,' but privately, 'you are the only ones we know willing to serve in the midst of the fire.'"

Kristof writes, "One son contracted polio; a daughter survived cerebral malaria; and the family nearly starved when the area was besieged during war and Dr. Foster insisted on sharing the family rations with 100 famished villagers."

Kristof concludes: "The next time you hear someone at a cocktail party mock evangelicals, think of Dr. Foster and those like him. These are folks who don't so much proclaim the gospel as live it. They deserve better."

I realize this is a dramatic example, beyond what many of us can do, but the example points out the amazing power of healing that we, too, might share – pitching in at a hospital, helping neighbors, giving rides to those who can't drive, sending cards to those who are lonely. That's where we see Jesus. As we suffer, we become more compassionate, learning from our mistakes. And finally, it is in helping others that we share the work of Jesus.

There is one last thing to note: The last sentence of our passage gives us a hint. Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath and that was against the religious rules. We must examine ourselves to make sure we don't make it harder for others and ourselves to do good. Amen.