

Sunday, May 26, 2019 – The Sixth Sunday of Easter

The First Reading is Psalm 67:1-7

- ¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
² that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
³ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.
⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁶ The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
⁷ May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere God.

The Second Reading is the Gospel of John 5:1-9

¹ After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ² Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, Jesus said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” ⁷ The 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.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

The Message is entitled *By the Poolside*

I have been lounging poolside this spring, given that the pool temperature is still a bit cool. It is very relaxing to sit in my backyard with the crystal blue waters of the pool and the comforting sounds of cascading water waltzing into our Koi pond. I enjoy observing the birds, butterflies and dragon flies that visit the pond, as I sit in silence reading or composing. Of course, I have also been known to doze off while enjoying my poolside lounging.

Lounging poolside or anywhere you find relaxing is necessary for our well-being. We need downtime from our 24/7 wired world. I smiled at the text I received from my son Aaron on Friday afternoon, for he wrote, “Our voyage [to Alaska] is soon to start and we will be off the grid.” Aaron and Kayla and a number of Kayla’s relatives have been lounging off the grid since Friday evening. We all need downtime whether it is poolside, an Alaskan cruise or somewhere else. Yet, the man in our gospel story had been lounging poolside for 38 years.

Now the Beth-zatha Pool, where the man in our story had lounged day after day and year after year, is located just inside the Sheep’s Gate in the City of Jerusalem. I remember

seeing first-hand what is believed to be this pool mentioned in John's Gospel, for the area was excavated by archeologists in the 19th century. In the 1st century though, the pool drew a crowd of invalids – the blind, lame and paralyzed, for the pool was believed to have special healing powers. It was rumored that the first one in the water after the pool's waters were troubled or agitated, presumably by an angel or heavenly messenger, would be healed.

But, don't you wonder who this sick man was? What was his infirmity? How did it happen? Did he have absolutely no family or friends? Or maybe his family and friends had given up on him after all these years or vice versa. Was he so stubborn, rude or crude that no one wanted to help him into the waters first year after year? Had his infirmity put distance between him and the synagogue, given the strict cleanliness laws? Would he even have been welcomed in the synagogue or would the good temple folk have steered clear of this man? There is so much we don't know about this sick man, not even his name.

Chances are, according to Will Willimon, this man was considered a cast off. Someone the church would have steered clear of, just like they did with lepers, the injured traveler, and the hemorrhaging woman. To be in contact with blood or the diseased and infirmed was to be made unclean, preventing temple worship. The pool would not have been a place where the priests or synagogue goers would have been found. Interacting with those at the pool would have disrupted their ability to worship. So, isn't it interesting that this is exactly where we find Jesus?

"Do you want to be made well?" said Jesus to the man lounging poolside. I want us to be clear that the sick man didn't answer Jesus' question directly. Instead, he just made an excuse as to why he has been lounging poolside for 38 years. I have no one. No one helps me. Where are the good temple folks? Nowhere to be found for thirty-eight years. Ouch.

Now as the man's story continues beyond our reading this morning, it's becomes obvious that gratitude does not flow from his heart. He doesn't leave the scene jumping and praising God. And when he is confronted by strict sabbath keepers for carrying his mat, he quickly said, "The man who healed me made me do it!" At first, he didn't even know the name of the one who healed him, but when he learned who had healed him, he immediately told the Jews, "Jesus made me break the Sabbath law." It was Jesus' fault that I was doing work on the Sabbath. The Jews were incensed and began persecuting Jesus for encouraging others to break Sabbath laws.

This man was a man who showed no gratitude or faith in anything but the magic powers of agitated waters, no humility or decency is claiming his own actions, whether lounging or carrying his mat on the Sabbath. In thinking about this man. Does this man sound like someone you would want to help? Are you willing to help someone, who isn't willing to try themselves? Probably not.

But, Jesus did. That is why this story is more about Jesus, than the sick man who was healed. Jesus didn't heal the sick man because of who the man was. Jesus healed the man, because of who Jesus was.

Fred Craddock talks about this story as a parable of God's grace. God's undeserved, unmerited love is offered to anyone and everyone, even those who may be ungrateful and undeserving. This is the radical message at the heart of the gospel we proclaim. This is what Jesus taught to his disciples. This is what Jesus lived. It's the reason Jesus could teach his disciples, saying, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus' disciples

are able to do this, not because of who their enemies or persecutors are, but because of who they are as Christ's disciples. The same holds true for us today.

So, we need to ask ourselves, who are we as Christ's disciples?

What is our character? Are we as willing as Jesus to offer grace-filled healing even to the ungrateful and undeserving? Are we willing show up and engage those in our society whose only hope is magical waters because everyone else, including the church, has given up on them?

Are we willing to go poolside, to the places where the discarded and forgotten hang out?

I recently learned that the people of Our Lady of the Rosary Cathedral in San Bernardino are. This faith community is responding to a critical need that I learned about just last week at our clergy gathering. Our U. S. Customs and Border Patrol are dropping off asylum seeking immigrant families at the San Bernardino Grey Hound bus station without any resources to make their way to relatives located somewhere in our great country. The Inland Coalition for Immigrant Justice meets the families at the bus station and transports them to the Cathedral. And then volunteers assist the families with basic needs, until transportation can be arranged to connect them with family.

Now I know that immigration is a volatile issue in our society, for opinions differ as to what should be done. Should we close our borders? Should we separate or keep families together? Should we house immigrants on our side of the border or on the Mexico side of our border? Should we arrest those placing water and food in the desert border lands? We also have to ask ourselves, why are families fleeing their homes and seeking another place to live? There are so many unanswered questions, yet in the meantime immigrant families have started being dropped off daily at the San Bernardino bus station.

We have to ask ourselves, "Where would Jesus' disciples be found?"

Another volatile issue in our society is homelessness, from the youth on our streets to those living in the wash or along the freeway. Fear often settles in when we perceive someone as homeless, causing us to distance ourselves from a homeless individual. We fear their presence if they walk in to the midst of our worship or fellowship. And building housing, whether it is winter emergency shelter, temporary shelter or permanent shelter, always meets with resistant, for nobody wants the units in their backyards. There is even fear that if we create resources to address this issue, then more homeless will just find their way to Redlands.

We have to ask ourselves, "Where would Jesus' disciples be found?"

This parable has so many facets. Yet, the one that resonates most deeply with me is the one Fred Craddock brought to my attention: the outpouring of God's extravagant grace. Will this gathered church do the same? Or will we like the 1st century synagogue neglect those who are poolside, because we fear how they might change us?

The Beth-zatha pool was in the shadow of the Temple, yet the priests and the worshippers steered clear, so much so that a sick man was there for 38 years.

Jesus simply showed up. And then he didn't even wait for an answer or a declaration of belief by the man. Jesus simply heals, with no water or spit, mud, or even expectation of gratitude. Jesus didn't wait for the man to come to him, Jesus went to the man. What about us?

Will we respond to the sea of need in our community, whether it is the asylum-seeking immigrant families being dropped off in San Bernardino or those without homes in our community, whether it is with children who have suffered traumas or youth who are struggling with their identity, whether it is those struggling with addiction, depression or loneliness or those who work full-time but can't support their families. The sea of need is great, but will we the church respond? Where will we extend the extravagant grace offered by the one we claim to follow?

Especially, by the poolside? I pray so. Amen.