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PICK UP YOUR MAT AND WALK
JOHN 5:1-9

Let us pray: O God, light of the minds that know you, life of the souls that love you, bless the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts breathe into us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen

There is a very important story about change recorded in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus has gone up from Cana of Galilee to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the great religious feasts.

It is worthy of note that He, as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world, would enter the city through the Sheep Gate, the entrance to the city through which the sheep for temple sacrifices were brought.

Once inside the city, he comes to the pool of Beth-zatha. Lying all around the pool are sick and paralyzed people. They are there because there is a legend that an angel would on occasion come and stir up the waters of the pool, and the first one to enter the pool after the angel stirred the water would be healed.

It was of course merely a superstition, but it was the last hope for many of these people. Whether anyone is healed or not, the people came believing that there is hope of healing at the pool. So, we can understand why, as the story says, numerous invalids were usually lying around down by the poolside.

They were waiting for a chance to get in the pool when the waters were agitated so they could be healed. They believed they had to get wet to get well. Jesus moves into the midst of such a group.

Jesus does not indiscriminately heal everyone at the pool that day, but as He moved among the blind and the lame, he is drawn to one particular, man who had been ill for 38 years. And here's what the text says. Listen again. Listen carefully.

Jesus observed him lying there and realized he had been there a long time. "Do you want to get well?" Jesus asked. The cripple replied, "Sir, I don't have anyone to put me in the pool when the water is agitated, and if I try to get in by myself, someone else beats me to it."

Then Jesus tells him, "Get up. Pick up your mat and walk around." And at once the man recovered, picked up his mat and started walking. He never got wet. However, He did get well. Jesus healed him.

Thirty-eight years is a long time to sit on your mat. Every day is the same. Waiting. Watching. Hoping. Not much changes. Sitting on his mat has become a way of life for the man in today's gospel. His life is stagnant. He's unable to see that the deep well of life is within him.

He's convinced that life will bubble up, over there, in that magic pool of water. So, he sits on his mat waiting, watching, and hoping that things will change. Now who is this person down by the poolside? Who is this 38-year, crippled castoff of society? Unable to walk. Why among so many Jesus chose this man to heal?

Most of the time, when we hear or read this story, we applaud him as a person of genuine faith in Jesus, and the fortitude to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. After all, didn't he believe Jesus and so he was healed? Didn't he obey Jesus when he got up, picked up his mat, and walked around?

This is the kind of person who really deserves to be healed. One who decided to "trust and obey, to be happy in Jesus, because there's no other way." You see, he played by the rules of both faith and practice--down by the poolside. Is that really what this story says? So, who is this castoff?

Well, there's not one word about his faith in this text. Not one hint that he believed in Jesus or anything else except the magic water in the pool. When Jesus saw him, he realized the man was stuck. But, instead of carrying him to the pool he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

The man answered that he had no one to carry him. Jesus, however said, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Rather than oblige the man by carrying him to the healing pool, Jesus challenged him to walk away from it.

If the man wanted to be healed, he had to quit focusing on a miracle cure and move in a different direction. He had to be led away from the thing that was giving him false hope. Jesus is saying we need to quit focusing on the things in life that give us false hope and focus on him.

"Stand up," he said. How could the man possibly know he couldn't walk away unless he truly tried? The man had become a victim, waiting for someone else to rescue him. Jesus wanted him to do something for himself. Rather than perceive himself as a victim Jesus wanted him to see himself as a whole person.

When Jesus encountered the man, he said there was no one to help him. He had given up. He had resigned himself to a state of hopelessness. So, what did Jesus do? He asked the impossible. "Stand up." This almost seems cruel. How could an invalid stand up? Perhaps he was saying, "Quit feeling sorry for yourself." Or, perhaps he was coaching him like he had never been coached before. Or, perhaps something else is going on here.

I believe Jesus told him to "stand up," because he saw in him what no one else had ever seen; potential. Jesus saw him as a whole human being. Jesus even takes it a step further. Not only does he tell the man to stand up, he tells him to take his mat with him.

In other words, he doesn't want him to return to his state of helplessness. As long as that mat remains near the pool, the man could have a relapse and return. In that case, all would be lost. Jesus cut off any possibility of him going back.

If you have given up some self-destructing habit, like smoking for instance, the last thing you want is to have a pack of cigarettes in your dresser drawer. The only way to walk in a new direction is to eliminate the resource that would make it easy for you to return.

It would appear that this is just another miracle story, where a man who could not walk was healed by Jesus and was then able to walk. When you carefully read the story, you will note that Jesus did nothing to cure him. He didn't touch him, he didn't say, "believe and you will be made well," he didn't even pray. What he did do was redirect the man's focus away from the pool and toward God.

And, if we read just a little further, we find out that he wasn't even grateful for being healed. In fact, when the religious authorities see him walking around carrying his mat, they ask him, "Who healed you?" and he says he doesn't even know.

Then when the authorities go on to inform him that healing and mat carrying is illegal on the Sabbath, he squeals and fingers Jesus as the one who healed him and told him to carry his mat. "Jesus broke the Sabbath laws, not me!" This is the one Jesus healed. Who is he? He's a real bum, that's who he is!

He had no gratitude, no faith, no humility, no guts. He didn't deserve to be healed. He didn't deserve anything. This is the one Jesus healed. This is the one, the one who had been on the welfare rolls for 38 years. Who is he? He's one of those people right here in the United States that author Michael Katz calls "the undeserving poor."

And Katz puts it this way in his book *From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*. These are Katz' words: For the most part, Americans talk about the poor as them. Poor people usually remain outsiders, strangers to be pitied or despised, helped or punished, ignored or studied, but rarely full citizens. They are, as some would refer to as, "Those people...."

But those are the people lying around, down by the poolside. Those people are the ones Jesus healed. Let me tell you a true story I read, using a fictitious name, we'll call him Joe. Joe comes by a church in California regularly to get a handout. Every time he goes to the church, he has a different story about why he needs a little money. He's a complete bum.

He's refused and wasted every opportunity to help himself. He's no longer welcomed in most churches. He's no longer welcomed around private and government agencies designed to help folks like him. Joe just won't play by the rules. He breaks all the rules.

In fact, several years ago on a Saturday morning, during a Bar Mitzvah over at a local temple, one of the guests asked the rabbi when the temple started charging for parking. And surprised, the rabbi went out to check on the situation. Guess what! There was Joe, charging \$5 a car.

Shame on Joe! But, friends, Joe is the one Jesus healed down by the poolside, even though Joe was still breaking the rules. Why? Why? The answer to that question is the message of this text. Jesus healed this man not because of who the man was, not because of who the person was, but because of who Jesus was. Hallelujah!

This story is a parable of God's grace, the undeserved, unmerited love of God. That's a radical idea, and it's right at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the reason Jesus taught us to love one another. We say God even loves us in spite of who we are.

And, yet, when we talk about helping others, loving others as God has loved us, reaching out to those on the margins of our society, doing something about poverty, we're really talking about helping the "deserving poor," those we call the "truly needy."

I'm not suggesting that the circumstances of our lives, like Joe, are irrelevant or have no effect. That's just not true. They do affect us. Jesus does not help the man get into the water. He comes to him on his mat, the same mat and situation the man so wants to escape and speaks words of life and resurrection. "Get up off your mat!" To quote Jesus a bit more accurately, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

The man does not leave his mat behind. It goes with him. His circumstances are real. The difference is he now carries them. They no longer carry him. The pool of Beth-zatha is drained of its power over us.

There is freedom where there was once imprisonment. Apathy gives way to creativity. Once stagnant waters now bubble with new life. Are you sitting on your mat? Are you looking for a pool of Beth-zatha? "Stand up,

take your mat and walk. Go to the pool because that's where Jesus healed.
Amen.

Let us pray. Grant to us, Gracious God, the wisdom and courage to love others as you have loved us, to be ministers of your amazing grace when it's seldom expected and often undeserved. Amen.