

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Sixth Sunday of Easter – May 1, 2016

“Empowered”

Scripture: John 5:1-9

Let me tell you... If I'm the man who has spent the last 38 years of my life laying beside that pool called Bethzatha waiting for the opportunity to be healed, and some stranger walks up to me on his two healthy legs and has the audacity to ask *me* -- after 38 years!-- if I *want* to be made well?... Well, I would give him a piece of my mind. *What do you think, buddy?!?* 38 years I've been here beside this pool every day. 38 years I've been hoping that the legend is true, and that an angel will stir up that water, so that whoever gets in first will be healed. 38 years I've watched that water and waited for somebody to get me into that pool at just the right time, and it never happened. For 38 years this has been my life. **[Speaking with less confidence, contemplating my inaction and helplessness...]** It's what I do every single day. 38 years and this is all I have known. It's all I have done. For 38 years... I've laid here and waited for somebody else to do for me. **[Pause.]** Of course I want to be healed. I just don't know what to do about it.

And you know what that stranger said to me?... “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” So I did.

Let me tell you all how I read this story... There is much to be said about Jesus' compassion, his sympathy for the struggles of the people he encounters, his willingness to feel for them and with them. He does heal them, he feeds them, he reassures them, and he loves them. But he also challenges them, cajoles them, questions them, and presses them to action. As I read it, Jesus doesn't so much do things *for* the people as he does things *with* them. He often asks things of those he helps: Believe in me. Or follow me. Or don't talk a lot about it. Or sometimes, tell others what you see. Do to others, he says, as you would have them do to you. Feed people. Welcome people. Be concerned for the needs of others. And when Jesus encounters the man at the pool of Bethzatha, when he learns that the man has lain in that same place for 38 years, I hear Jesus' question to him as both a compassionate inquiry and a soul-searching challenge. "Do you [even] want to be made well?" Hey, it's a fair question. After 38 years of familiar surroundings, familiar routines, familiar disappointments, to be made well could be a rather scary proposition. What would the man do every day if he were no longer to lay beside that pool waiting on others to take care of him? Would he have to work? Was there a family that must now depend on him? What would he do with his days? What would he do with his newfound wellness?

You see, I have observed in my vocation that people can choose sometimes to be content with discontent. We can learn to feign satisfaction in our dissatisfaction.

We can accept the burdens of our dependencies, our addictions, our stunted relationships, and we can stay in those places year after year after year, because at least we know them. We know what to expect or what not to expect. And to change our routines, to confront our addictions, to alter our habits, to speak truth to those who hurt us, or for us to stop hurting others, to face our fears... is truly a difficult thing. It takes hard work, and it requires action on our part.

I notice that when Jesus speaks with the man by the pool of Bethzatha, when the man laments that no one ever helps him ---in 38 years no one has helped him--- Jesus' first words to him are: "Stand up!" Jesus invites him to act. You take positive action, he says. You participate in your change. And in doing so, I believe what Jesus does is not only heal but empower. He offers the man strength and confidence to take responsibility for himself, to help him regain not only the use of his legs, but his dignity as a human being. He is being "made well," and he is an active part in his own healing.

I think I met the man by the pool in Bethzatha once, though he came to me in the form of a young woman who lived in a busy city. She came to my office in the church, and she told me that, for generations, the women of her family had suffered physical abuse at the hands of fathers and grandfathers. It was a terrible family habit, and, as you can imagine, a not-so-well-kept secret. And she told me how powerless

she felt to deal with it. And the conversation by the pool of Bethzatha immediately flooded my mind, and the words just came out of my mouth: “Do you want to be made well?” I asked her. Yes, she answered. And she stood up, and that day she began to walk a new path. That day she took up her burden, and together we sought help from others, we built a safe plan for her to confront her father and do our best to stop the abuse. It wasn’t easy, but it was healing. And I was amazed by her faith.

Now understand I am not trying to say that one can simply *will away* paralysis. Or that if you are suffering from addiction or illness that it is simply because you just haven’t taken enough responsibility for your life, or that it is easy to step away from broken relationships, confront what hurts you, or make unilateral changes in your lives. Quite the contrary. All these things are hard to do. But I take from this story this morning by the pool of Bethzatha that Jesus would call us to take what action we can, and to feel supported, challenged, and empowered to deal with our burdens. Perhaps an illness is ravaging the body. Might we find power in our faith to not let it utterly depress our spirit? Perhaps grief tempts us to despair. Might Jesus empower us with faith in resurrection and redemption, so that grief is tempered by the hope of reunion with those we love? Are we bound to habits that harm us? I think Jesus would remind us that he is there to help us take our own first steps toward healing. When we know something needs to change, a first question to consider might be: “Do we want to be made well?” And if we do, if we *truly* do, then count on the

power of Jesus with us, take some action, seek to change some perspective, reach out to others for help and support, and healing can come. And though not all may be as we wish, we can be made well, and we can move toward wholeness.