

John 5:2-9a (9b-29)

March 6, 2020

World Day of Prayer

Outside the walls of Jerusalem, but near its Sheep Gate, is the Pool of Bethesda, probably part of a complex devoted to Asclepius, the Greek demigod of healing and medicine. In this complex, the closest thing in the ancient world to a hospital, the blind, the lame and the paralyzed lie on the ground seeking their last hope for healing: a divine miracle. One man has been ill for thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight years, every day hoping for a miracle. Thirty-eight years, every day denied.

Nearby, the sighted, the mobile, the fortunate citizens of Jerusalem come and go through the gate, thinking little of those lying nearby. They don't see him. They don't hear him. Their peace of mind depends upon it; otherwise they might acknowledge how easily they could become him. Otherwise they might acknowledge that they owe him care.

We have heard from the women of Zimbabwe. We have heard of the country's wealth of natural resources, its engaged citizens, its Christian faith. But we have also heard of violence and inequality. We have heard of political violence, gender-based violence, inadequate health care and programs for special-needs children. We have heard

of economic problems causing men to leave for the towns and mines, searching for jobs to feed their families, leaving the women behind with little to give their children.

There is a legend in Jerusalem that every so often, an angel of the Lord stirs the waters of the pool, and that the first person to enter the water will be healed of their ailments. A miraculous cure—just what the sick and injured people around the pool dream of! But only one of them can be first. There is much pushing and shoving; it's everyone for themselves. The sick man, unable to move, has no hope of this cure because he has no friends to help him.

Likewise, the women of Zimbabwe do their best, but there is nobody to help them. Where is the government, where are the rich people, where is the wealth of the nation that should be theirs? Where is the international community? Seeming absent and indifferent, just as the traffic in and out of the Sheep Gate is indifferent to the suffering nearby.

Many of us in Canada would like to help. We would like to help those lying sick in our streets; we would like to help those in need, far away in Zimbabwe. We would like to help the women who are raising their kids alone. We would like to help the men, far from their loved ones, struggling to find any work to send money home. But we shrug and say, "What can we do? Our politicians won't listen, our leaders won't listen, the system protects the wealthy and denies us meaningful participation."

What can we do?

We can reframe the question.

What is *God* doing?

What God is doing is what Jesus is doing.

Jesus walks into the scene, and what does he do? Does he say, "hey, somebody help this guy into the water"? No. He doesn't participate in this system that still creates winners and losers, because it's still the case that only the first person can be healed. He doesn't participate in this system that lets the rich and healthy pass on by without being embarrassed or getting involved.

No, he rejects this system. He says to the man, "Stand up, take up your mat and walk."

Amazing! Wonderful! He takes up his mat and walks for the first time in 38 years.

End scene.

But what happens next?

He walks into the street.

Carrying his mat.

On the Sabbath.

When you're not supposed to do any work, including carrying your mat.

Soon the religious authorities, the keepers of the moral and social order, see and question him.

They don't care that he was healed. They care that the rules were broken, the system challenged, the hierarchies destabilized.

This is John the Gospel writer's way of highlighting their moral and spiritual blindness.

Jesus doesn't just heal the man's physical ailments. He restores him to life in the community. And in so doing, he makes him into a disciple. He makes him into a walking provocation. "This guy is breaking the Sabbath rules. This is the guy who used to lie paralyzed by the pool. Here's the proof; here's his mat. I healed this guy on the Sabbath. I healed this guy outside the very limited system that keeps the oppressed in competition with each other. What are you going to do about it?"

They are going to question and accuse Jesus, which gives him the opportunity to testify further: "I am the Father's Son; I am his representative; I am doing what he is doing. Is the God of justice the one who stirs up the water so one may be healed, or is he the one who stirs up the society so many may be healed? Surely our God is the one who stirs up against injustice, as the Psalms proclaim?"

Does God live outside our mess and our pain, like those who pass in and out of the Sheep gate, occasionally dipping her toe carefully in the water to set up a few ripples?

Or does God lean in, roll up her sleeves and really stir things up? Is God a disturber, a provoker, a protester?

Of course she is. And what is she doing in Zimbabwe? The women, her children, are banding together. The Christians, her children, are praying for the integrity of their churches and their country. Integrity is being who you really are, who you are called to be. And who they really are – who we really are – is children of the God of Justice. Who they really are – who we really are – is disciples of Jesus Christ. And disciples of Jesus Christ, like that man with his mat, are walking provocations to injustice, walking provocations to apathy, walking provocations to injustice and learned helplessness. Those women in Zimbabwe aren't helpless.

And we in Canada, are we helpless? Do we have to walk by the invalids lying by the pool? Do we have to shake our heads and say, “there's nothing we can do, our politicians won't listen”?

No, we don't. The Abbotsford Christian Leaders Network recently hosted a presentation on influencing politicians. The speaker said, by the time politicians are asking for input, they've already made up their minds on the big issues. If you want to make a real change, if you want to improve society, you have to join the riding association, you have to attend candidate selection meetings, you have to get involved at the grassroots.

That sounds like a heck of a lot of work. Much more than answering a survey or writing a letter.

But “Take up your mat and walk” doesn't mean "Hooray! You're all better! Go and have a carefree life." "Take up your mat and walk" is an invitation to live a *full* life, including a full life of faith in and for God's world and her children. To take up your mat and walk is to become a walking provocation. It is the beginning of discipleship. It is the beginning of a new life. For you, for us, for God's world.

Today, through the women of Zimbabwe, these ancient words have become the Word of God to us:

"Take up your mat, and walk."

Amen.

Sources:

"Asclepion" Wikipedia. Accessed March 5, 2020.

"Pool of Bethesda." Wikipedia. Accessed March 5, 2020.

Wendt, Fritz. "Addressing Poverty When the System Fails: John 5:1-9." Political Theology Network, May 20, 2019. Accessed March 5, 2020.