

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2016
Year C

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Acts 16:9-15
Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5
John 5:1-9

Jesus said to the invalid, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am not going to preach on the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, but I do want to draw your attention to it. This story of Paul going to Macedonia from what is now Turkey after seeing a vision is of immense historical importance. This is the moment that Christianity arrives in Europe. Up to now it has been a purely Asian and eastern religion. Had Paul ignored this vision, the history of the world might have been very different. Now, to the Gospel.

Today’s Gospel reading is short and forms the lead-in to a longer story about how the Jewish leaders came to be opposed to Jesus. Let us start with the healing itself. One can read this a number of different ways. One can take it at face value. Jesus goes to the pool of Beth-zatha, which in the King James Version is called Bethesda. There he finds many people with all sorts of ailments. He focuses in on one man who had been sick for thirty-eight years. He asks the man if he wants to get well. The man responds by explaining that he can’t get to the water fast enough when it moves and someone else always gets there first. Some of the early codices of the fifth century, on which the King James Version is based, include a verse that explains that an angel would come from time to time and disturb the water, and the first one to get into the water after the disturbance would be healed. This is the basis for the great spiritual “Wade in the water, God’s going to trouble the water.” It happens that the earliest papyri we have of this text, P66 and P75, which are about two hundred years earlier, omit this useful explanation, and so it is left out of the modern translation we are using today.

In any case, Jesus deals with the situation by simply telling the man to get up, take his mat and walk. Which he does. Then comes the single short sentence: "That day was a Sabbath." What follows is the story of how the Jewish religious leaders were offended by what they perceive as Jesus' violation the prohibition against work on the Sabbath. So, Jesus heals. Jesus has compassion on those who suffer. Jesus can fix what other agencies cannot. This is good news certainly. But, frankly, if we have been reading the Gospels much, it is kind of old hat.

What if this encounter is a little edgier? What if we tell the story this way: One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus sees him lying there and knows that he had been there a long time, he says to him, "Thirty-eight years?! Do you *want* to be made well?" The sick man gets defensive and whiny and answers Jesus, "Sir, It's not my fault. 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. What do you want me to do?" Jesus does not raise a finger to help him. He doesn't pray for him. He doesn't lay hands on him. He just says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man is made well, and he takes up his mat and begins to walk. Now this day is a Sabbath.

Now there is no doubt that Jesus can be gentle and compassionate, but he can also push us when we need pushing. This is Jesus as Geno Ariemma expecting this guy to do his best. I remember hearing a sermon from Pope Shenouda, III, the head of the Coptic Church in Egypt, on the occasion of the dedication of the first Coptic Church building in Connecticut. The congregation had taken out a mortgage to pay for the buildings. The text was the story of the man Jesus calls to follow him, but who insists on seeing to his business first and misses out on being a disciple. The Egyptian pope told the congregation that message of this gospel is that Jesus is not interested in our excuses, and they had better keep up to date on their payments. I think we are seeing this tougher side of Jesus in this passage today.

When any of us are facing a difficulty, many of us, or at least I, can easily fall into a feeling of victimhood. I find excuses for why the situation came about and why I cannot get myself out of it. I can list how others could have helped me but did not. I can think about how my life would have been different if certain events had not occurred. I can blame my upbringing or my culture. In short, I can whine. Now please, do not get me wrong. There certainly are many people who truly are victims of bad luck, ill health, oppression by the powerful, and many, many other evils. They all deserve our compassion, intercession, and help. I never, ever want to blame the victim. But now I'm talking about myself, and if any of you relate to this, fine.

In my dealings with Jesus, he is very compassionate, and cares about every little and big problem I encounter. And Jesus can stir me to my best efforts. He encourages me to participate in my salvation. There is a fundamental interior stance towards life, the universe, and everything that sees it all as an adventure, and opportunity for growth, a chance to become our best selves. My younger daughter, Ellen, exemplifies this for me. Once, we were hiking in the Adirondacks. It was an overnight trip to climb two mountains that had no trails. We were going to hike, on trails, for many miles over a height of land to a campsite. Then, after pitching our tent, and stowing our gear we would climb the first of the two peaks. Then the next day we were to climb the second mountain, and then hike out. On the first day, soon after we started the hike in, it started to rain. It rained hard. The trails became muddy and slippery. We became soaked through. We got to our campsite and made camp. We started up the trailless peak. My daughter has always had some vision problems. At one point, as we were crossing an area of bog and swamp, she misjudged and stepped on what she thought was a piece of solid dirt that wasn't. She sank into black, cold muck up to mid thigh. It was the end of a long day, and she was tired and wet. Her shoe came off in the suction, and she had to grope around in the mud to find it. For many, this would have been the last straw and

tears or cursing would have ensued. Not Ellen. Her response was, “Wahoo!” She chose to see this as an adventure. G. K. Chesterton defines an adventures as “an inconvenience rightly viewed.” I could not have been more proud.

Now, obviously, a mishap during a recreational activity is very different from a chronic, debilitating disease. Still, Jesus invites us to participate in our own healing, saving, and resurrection as much as we can. Many times in the Gospels, Jesus tells someone, “Your faith has made you well.”

That day was the Sabbath. This brings us to the final line. It is almost as if this story defines how Jesus understands the keeping of the Sabbath. He does not see it a avoiding activity or a list of things not to do. He sees it as time for resting in God, for renewing our relationship to God, and to the health and well-being that is part of the goodness of the world that God created for our joy and God’s.

So as we leave this place, maybe we can think about how we can rise and take up our mats and walk. We can see what new thing Jesus is asking us to try in response to our challenges and difficulties. We can avoid blaming our situations on others, including God, the market, entropy, or our parents. And we can see every day as chance to practice Sabbath. And maybe we will find ourselves saying, “Wahoo!” and pulling ourselves out of the mud.