

Sermon: **Sitting by the Pool**

Text: John 5:1-9

Reverend James R. Henry  
The Elijah Kellogg Congregational Church  
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**INTRODUCTION TO READING: John 5:1-9**

The setting is a pool of water near the temple in Jerusalem named Bethzatha, meaning “house of mercy”. There are a group of people sitting and lying around this pool. There was a tradition regarding this pool (included as a marginal reading in the NRSV translation) that explains why these people are here. They are “*waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.*”

We don't know a lot about this pool. Archeologists think they have found what may have been the remains of this pool with five porches. It may be that an intermittent spring would periodically ripple the surface of the water.

Whatever the facts, these people, blind, lame, and paralyzed, are there by the pool in the hope of being cured.

**SERMON:**

This is a story of sheer mercy; of God's unprovoked grace; of indiscriminate love. Jesus comes along and just flat out brings healing to a desperate man.

As far as we know, the man hadn't called for Jesus or asked for healing. There's nothing here about his faith, or prayers, or good conduct. As a matter of fact, if you read on you will see that he didn't even know who it was that healed him until later when Jesus confronted him.

The whole thing blows holes in any kind of theology that would try to harness the grace of God or to meter and dispense it. Those who would try to put a meter on faith, saying, “If you have enough faith”; can they put a number on it? Those who would say, “You must pray so hard for so long, or must do so many good things”. Or worse, those who would say, “Just call the number on the bottom of the screen and send an offering.”

This story tells of how God sometimes kindly intrudes into our lives graciously and wondrously, often in our moment of despair. It's sheer mercy, unprovoked grace, indiscriminate love. Jesus says, “Stand up and walk”. In his grace and power we can do we could not otherwise do.

The scene is absolutely pathetic. Try to imagine it. These people are not the strong and powerful class, sitting by the pool drinking wine coolers and reading the Wall Street Journal. They are *invalids* (NRSV). We might say they are *disabled* (NIV). The root idea of the word is *weak and powerless*. In that day and in that society they were indeed invalids... in-valids, only to be pitied and set aside; of no real value or use.

I note that Jesus is not always and only in the temple with the religious establishment; the more influential and powerful. We find him here in this pathetic place with the weak and powerless. He sees the individual in the group. They are not a faceless, forsaken class. He takes note of their pain and hurt, and he says to this one, “*Do you want to be made well?*”

“*Do you want to be made well?*” When you hear this man's answer, as he articulates his woeful plight, you begin to understand what a pathetic place this is.

“*Sir*”, he replies, “*I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I'm making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.*”

Let me try to put some flesh on this. It may be akin to what we sometimes feel in our moments of discouragement and despair.

*“Sir, I’m alone. I have no one”* (That’s one of the saddest things a human being can say.) *“Sir, I’m helpless. I have no one to put me into the pool. I try, sir, believe me I try. I watch; I stare at that water. The first hint of motion and I get started, trying to make my way into the pool. But every time, someone else steps down ahead of me. I lose every time.*

*I try, sir, but let me tell you; you keep trying and losing for 38 years and you begin to realize that you’re not going to succeed. I can’t. I just can’t. And that’s tough enough, but when other people say, ‘Never say can’t. If at first you don’t succeed, try then try again. Can’t is not in our vocabulary’, then you feel twice condemned.*

*Sir, I’m alone. I’m helpless. I can’t win. I always lose because there is always someone else who has help, or someone else who is just a little less weak than I and is able to drag his sorry body over the dirt just a little faster.*

*But you know, sir, the ultimate pain is the cruelty of this whole place. It’s a damned place. We’re all in competition with each other, trying to get ahead of each other. Ultimately, it’s a cruel, cold selfishness that wins here. You may not understand this, sir, but pain and rejection can be very selfish. Pain and loss and rejection can only think of itself. It’s hardly generous. My only hope... and I’ve come to use that word sparingly... my only hope is that someday everyone else will be even worse off; weaker and slower than I, so I can win. Sir, is that a sick kind of hope or what. So if you have any sensibility at all, you feel guilty for trying. That’s three times condemned.*

*After 38 years you learn that there is a fine line between hope and despair. And for the sake of your own sanity, you soon fear false hope. Water or no water; angel or no angel, you can’t get your hopes up too much. But still, for the want of something better, you continue to be here. It can’t hurt. Is that hope, sir? Or is that despair?*

*After a while everything you say you believe; everything you have faith in, is only a theory of sorts about angels and water. It’s a cherished thought, but it’s only an idea. Still, it’s all you have.*

*It’s like lining up a hundred people with heart disease and telling them there is one available heart for transplant a hundred yards down the field. Then someone says, ‘Ready, set, go’.*

*So you ask me, sir, if I want to be made well. It should be an easy and quick answer, but your question is not as easy as others might think. Do I want to be made well? Of course I do. That’s academic. But that’s just the problem; it’s only academic. I’ve learned that I can’t and so I’m afraid to want. After 38 years of wanting but only being disappointed, it’s painful to keep wanting.*

*If I could, I would. I keep trying, but I can’t. I need help, but I have no one. So please, sir, don’t do this to me. I don’t want to think about my loneliness and helplessness and my powerlessness, or about faith and hope. I’m tired of losing. My life has no color anymore. It’s just beige, sitting here by the pool.”*

Does he want to be made well? He doesn’t say “yes”. He doesn’t say “no”. In times past, I’ve often read this story, expecting this man to answer, *“Are you kidding?!? Why do you think I’ve been here for 38 years? I’m not here for camaraderie and fellowship! What a silly question!”*

But I think I’ve come to see that sometimes questions like this are not silly after all, nor are they easy to answer.

There are still a lot of people sitting by that pool today. Some of us may be sitting there. It’s been so long that we don’t quite know what we really want. We’re tired of being alone and feeling helpless and powerless. We’re tired of being disappointed. We’re tired of losing. And we’ve about had it with the well meaning, but empty encouragements of others. We’re tired of trying. Yet we can’t help but try even though we expect to lose again. And we don’t rightly know if that’s hope or despair.

But here we are, sitting by the pool, watching the water, waiting for the angel. Hey, who knows? Is that faith? We don’t really know.

Jesus said to the man, “*Stand up, take up your mat and walk*”. John tells us that at once the man was made well. He took up his mat and began to walk. John reports it in such a matter-of-fact way. Jesus doesn’t chide him for his pessimism. He doesn’t rebuke him for a lack of faith. He doesn’t start in on him about some prerequisite beliefs, or prayers, or right actions. He simply says, “*Stand up and walk*”, and he did.

That’s grace. That is simple, profound, unprovoked grace.

I can’t explain the grace of God or the workings of God. I don’t know exactly what this man was thinking or what he saw in Jesus. I don’t know how to measure his faith or lack of faith. All I know is what is reported here. He knew he couldn’t get up and walk, yet Jesus was telling him to do the very thing he knew he couldn’t do. And he did it! That’s sheer, unprovoked grace. Only later did he realize that it was the power of the living Christ that made him well.

This story tells of how God sometimes kindly intrudes into our lives graciously and wondrously, often in our moment of despair. It’s sheer mercy, unprovoked grace, indiscriminate love. Jesus says, “Stand up and walk”. In his grace and power we can do what we could not otherwise do.

When you know you can’t, and yet you do, you know it wasn’t you that did it. You know it was the grace of God.

Are you sitting by the pool this morning? Do you want to be made well? I can’t personally issue you promises. I can’t personally give you hope. I’m not going to peddle some kind of health-and-wealth stuff. I can only repeat the question of Jesus. “*Do you want to be made well?*” I can only pass along the call of Jesus. “*Come to me, all you who are weary and helpless, and I will give you rest.*”

I can only urge you; don’t live your life sitting by the pool. Don’t spend your days looking at the water in disappointment.

Look to Jesus in hope. He will speak for himself.

Amen.