

Sermon for May 22, 2022

Shivon Miller

A few years before the pandemic began, I worked with a team from within our Synod to write a curriculum for youth striving to teach them ways to encounter scripture. It used tangible objects to teach elements of scripture study. After a year of using the material, feedback from groups was that the most meaningful discussions happened during the section of the studies that revolved around a red foam, squishy question mark. After each scripture experience, youth were asked to pass around the foam question mark and on their turn they were asked to share what questions bubbled up throughout their time with the text. Permission was given for all questions – those related to their understanding of the text, their belief or doubts about God, their understanding of the connection to their life. The goal was not to have the leaders answer the questions but simply to give space for naming them and recognizing that often when reading scripture we end up sitting with more questions than answers.

At first many struggled with this section. We have been wired to seek scripture for answers. To read the text like there is one answer. To desire for a teacher or pastor to tell us what it means. But ultimately it may be the questions that surface within us that lead youth and adult alike to deeper engagement with this living Word.

Reading today's scripture, a number of questions bubble up for me. It's a short text today, so I want to read it once more and invite you to listen for your questions as I share mine.

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Anybody already wondering what the festival of the Jews was and if it is significant to understanding this text? Why does Jesus decide to go up to Jerusalem?

²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes.

More questions for me - Is a Sheep Gate literally a gate for sheep? Why this name Beth-zatha—what does it mean? What is a portico and why five of them?

The text continues:

³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” ⁷The sick man answered him, “Sir, 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.” ⁸Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath.

Endless questions:

Why do people come and lay at this pool?

What has this man been ill with for thirty-eight years?

If he isn't able to pull himself to the pool – how did this man come to be at the gate in first place? If he could get to the gate – why not to the pool?

Out of all the people at the pool – why does Jesus see this man, know he has been there a long time and choose to engage him?

Why does Jesus begin by asking this man “Do you want to be made well?”- is that not assumed after 38 years of being ill and being found waiting at this pool?

What is the significance of the water “stirred up”? Why do people look for healing in these waters?

Why has no one helped put the man in the pool?

Why is there a need to be first – is there only room for one at a time?

Why does Jesus insist the man take his mat with him when he stands and walks?

Is it simply Jesus' words that enable this man to walk again?

Why on the Sabbath day?

What questions pull at you?

I am drawn to wondering about this man - able to reach the gate but not the pool. How often does healing seem just out of reach? In this pandemic, every time we begin to think we may reach the waters, we find we are still back at the gate. How often do we quit instead of continuing the hard work of healing?

I am drawn to wondering why this man had no one who would carry him the whole way to the pool. Are others so focused on their own need for the waters that they step right over him on the way, rush to beat him as to not lose their own chance? Where is the community that chooses to see people instead of walking by, that is *unwilling* to leave people suffering just out of reach of healing? Who is waiting for someone to walk with them all the way to the waters?

I am drawn to wondering why people came to believe that it is the pool that will provide healing in the first place? This is the first time I read this text and realized that the man's healing ultimately has nothing to do with the stirred up waters. Jesus does not come along and help the man get into the pool, he simply says “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” The healing does not come from the source the man expected but rather from Christ alone. How often are

we looking to the wrong source for healing – what if we believed that healing came from Christ alone?

And why does Jesus' healing come with the instructions "take your mat?" This man has laid on this mat for years unable to stand and go forth. His desire is most certainly to move beyond the mat. Does our baggage go with us? Is it important for him to carry the memory of his past, of his illness? Why? Are we reminded of our continued need for Jesus? Are we more likely to see others' pain and seek healing for all with mat in hand?

But maybe the question that sticks with me most from this text is not my questions but the question Jesus asks. Do you want to be made well? What do you hear in Jesus' question? The man gives an excuse "I have no one to put me into the pool...others step ahead of me." Jesus simply responds "Stand up..." No waters, no other people, no excuses... In the presence of Jesus, with the desire to be made well, the man gets up and walks.

We understand the word of God to be a living Word. We believe that when it is read and preached, Jesus is present, the Word of God is at work. Maybe the living Word is most powerfully at work in our questions, in our willingness to wonder. What questions were stirred up and what sticks with you this morning?

Jesus asked the man "Do you want to be made well?" How might healing come from a question you hear from the living Word today?