

“Off the Mat, On the Move”  
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John 5:1-9

It’s intriguing how often Jesus will ask a question that seems to have an obvious answer, like “Do you want to be made well?” Hard to imagine anyone replying, “Thanks. That’s nice, but I’d rather keep my cancer or my MS” or whatever it might be that’s affecting a person’s health. But Jesus asks anyway, and sometimes the answers are surprising, too, like the one given by the man who had long laid by the pool of Beth-zatha.

Instead of saying, “Yes! That would be awesome! Please do!” the man complained about how long he’d waited there for his chance to immerse himself in the pool which, when stirred up by an underground spring, healed those who were in the water. Apparently, people had beat him to it every single time for years, and that’s understandable. Some people are sicker than others, and it seems as if the man on the mat might have been paralyzed, or at least wasn’t very mobile, which could explain why he always missed out. What’s really sad about this story is that nobody helped him. They were too focused on their own healing and the healing of those they loved.

But Jesus felt compassion for the man and basically said, “Get up and go,” and the man got up and went, rolling up his mat, ending his long and frustrating vigil by the miraculous pool. What’s interesting is that among all the many people gathered around that pool hoping for a cure, it seems that Jesus asked only this one person if he wanted to be made well, and if Jesus healed anyone else, John doesn’t mention it, which probably means Jesus didn’t.

That’s slightly disturbing, until we remember that Jesus performed miracles for a purpose that went far beyond the immediate effect on the person in need. These miracles served as signs

of his identity as Messiah and the Son of God. In fact, a healing or an exorcism or even raising someone from the dead is almost incidental to the event itself. The miracle is principally about revealing who Jesus is.

In this case, Jesus wanted to show that he was the living water and that those who drank from him would never be thirsty again. The man on the mat obviously didn't know that. Otherwise, he would have answered, "Yes, please. Heal me." Instead, he seems to ask for help to get into the pool before the others. But how wonderful it would have been if Jesus had healed everyone surrounding the pool.

That would have been sensational and, from our perspective, more compassionate. Maybe it was the sheer duration of this man's suffering, 38 years of trying and failing, 38 years of disappointed hopes that caused Jesus to choose him, sort of like a seniority system of suffering, where those who'd hurt the longest got the miracle. Maybe Jesus felt that the pool could handle the rest. We'll never know, so what we get is a simple, quick episode that seems like it's over before it starts, and then Jesus, like the man with his mat, moves on, and maybe that's the point.

Sometimes, Jesus moves fast to pursue his purpose, a healing far greater than a physical cure, one that cleanses sin, restores and reconciles relationship with God and others, and offers the opportunity for renewed life now and life everlasting in the age to come. The question for us is, "Can we live with that?"

Can we hustle and keep up with Jesus on his journey? Can we stay focused on a broader, more distant horizon, a more glorious purpose that transcends the minutiae that often clouds and consumes our days? Can we the Church, the Body of Christ, do as Jesus did and sometimes forego the good for the sake of what's great?

Those questions are much tougher than “Do you want to be made well?” Hard to answer, much less put into practice, but for the Church to be well and stay well, to be able to offer wellness and wholeness for others, we need to find answers through prayerful discernment, and we can’t waste time on worry or complaining, like the man on the mat. That just distracts us.

How many times have we heard or said, “Where are all the people, especially the young people?” That’s a good question with many answers, none of which fully explain the situation or how it can be changed. It would be good if more young people, and for that matter people of all ages, engaged with God in a healthy community of faith like ours, and pursuing the purpose of figuring out how to attract younger people is a good thing that we’re working on, and having success with. Yesterday, we married a beautiful young couple, Ben and Amanda, and when they return from their honeymoon, please congratulate them. We will baptize an infant every weekend for the next three weeks.

But perhaps the great thing would be for us to figure out a way to meet them where they are, which for us might mean change. Unlike the people around the pool who ignored the man on the mat, we need to help people who need healing, but sometimes we get too focused on what we’re doing rather than what God’s doing and how we might be part of His work.

Jesus met the man on the mat where he was, sitting by that pool, dejected and frustrated, so focused on that miraculous, bubbling water that had worked for people for generations that he didn’t realize there was someone who could heal him, no bath required, standing right there. What obsesses us to the point where we can’t see or hear Jesus for who he is and offer him a sensible, faithful response?

Another example, we often lament about how great The Episcopal Church once was, 50 years ago, when national membership was twice what it is today, and people disagree about why

that's changed. One theory is that we've tried too hard to be relevant to the culture and lost the central message of salvation that inspires and motivates. Others think that we've not tried hard enough to translate the gospel into something accessible and intelligible for people living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Our worship, for instance, is for many people obscure, to put it kindly. There were a lot of young people here at the wedding, and some of them seemed a bit puzzled. However, others find it refreshingly reverent, a peaceful way to connect with the mystery of God.

But do high numbers equal greatness? The number of atheists in our country increases every year. Does that make atheism great? Maybe the status of The Episcopal Church has nothing to do with numbers. Perhaps we are part of that "faithful remnant" the Bible talks so much about. Just because something is popular doesn't mean that it's right. Jesus had a tiny core of real followers. The masses came to see the show, and when it was over, they went away and lived as they had before.

Maybe the great thing we need to focus on is more depth, not breadth; higher quality over quantity. Now don't think I'm making excuses here, because none need to be made. The membership of St. Luke's has grown by a little over 30% in less than five years, and that's a good thing, the sign of a hospitable and healthy congregation where good things are happening. Those who choose to make their faith home here, and a very high percentage of people who visit do just that, experience quality worship and fellowship, but how can we go even deeper into the life of faith together?

There are many possible answers to that question, and discovering which ones are best is the work of the entire community, not just me or a small cadre of leaders. But a general rule of thumb for me is that when it comes to going deeper in our faith together, the answers that lead to an easier path are probably less helpful than those that demand more of us – more time and

energy on study and prayer and service. Following Jesus is meant to be intense, an obsession, not a pastime. He didn't come to be part of our lives. Jesus came to take over our lives.

Can we discern the good from the great and sometimes sacrifice the former to reach for the latter? Are we prepared to make changes so that we're nimble enough to follow Jesus, who's always on the move? Could we be like Paul, who solely on the basis of a vision, left immediately on a long journey? If those questions make you a little nervous, good. They should. They make me a little nervous, too. But to stay true to who we are, to who Jesus wants us to become, we've got to answer hard questions and make difficult choices, and sometimes sacrifices, for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of that which is truly great.

You have no idea how much I'd like to tie this up in bow, hand it over and say "Here you go." But it doesn't work like that. Never has in the Church, no matter how many times we've tried. We've got to work for it together. We need to open our hearts to the grace of God, listen carefully for the voice of Jesus, and then we get off the mat, free to move wherever and however Jesus chooses. Amen.