



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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God-Blindness

John 5:1-9

A sermon by William M. Klein

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1 After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. 3 In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed [*waiting for the stirring of the water; 4 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.*]¹ 5 One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6 When 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?" 7 The 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." 8 Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." 9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath. (Jn. 5:1-9 NRSV)

1

You and I are not so very different, are we? Certain things about us are fairly universal. I think it is fair to say everyone knows the experience of fatigue...the raptured joy of affection...the deep contentment of a satisfying meal...the sharp, stabbing pain of loneliness. The list could go on and on, couldn't it – because, regardless of race, creed, culture, or color, we are not so very different.

See what you think about this assertion: I believe it is universally true that we all **long for something**.² We may not know exactly what that "something" is for which we long...but that does not keep us from longing for it.

Listen to what writer Frederick Buechner says about the Innkeeper of Bethlehem. Buechner imagines him saying, "All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come – your destiny, your joy, your heart's desire. As for me, when he came, I missed him...I missed him."³

2

The writer of John's Gospel tells us a story about longing. It goes like this.

As Jesus walked through the crowd gathered by the pool of Bethzatha, he happened upon a poor, sick man who, for 38 years, had been waiting for the chance to be healed. He sat beside this particular pool because it was believed that when the water began to bubble, the first person into the pool would be healed. The people believed these bubbles were caused by an angel of God.

For 38 years this poor man lay there, inching (we can imagine) closer and closer to the pool. But every time the water was troubled, some other sick person slipped in ahead of him.

Jesus approached this pathetic man and asked, "Do you want to be healed?" It may seem like an odd question...but you would think that if he really wanted to be healed he would have managed at least once in all that time to be into the troubled water first.

"Do you want to be healed?" asked Jesus. The man did not give a direct answer. What he said was that there was no one willing to help him into the pool the minute the water was troubled.

Without pressing the man further, Jesus said, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." And he did. For 38 years he had lived by the pool of Bethesda...watching people enter the bubbling waters and emerge healed...and waiting his turn. Then in a twinkling of an eye, the pool became superfluous. With pallet in hand, he set skipping off down the road with a new lease on life.

3

Does it strike you that something is missing here? There is no account of the man touching the hem of Jesus' garment. No account of the healing being followed by an exhortation to the crowd. There isn't even any mention of the man's earnest faith in Jesus, the great healer. As he walked away, he didn't even know Jesus' name - an error in judgment that soon came to haunt him because, you see, it so happened the day of his healing was also the Sabbath...and you know what that meant. According to the Jewish law, by carrying his pallet, he was in violation of the strict requirement to rest on the Sabbath.

He hadn't gone far when some pious religious leaders stopped him and wanted to know why he was flagrantly violating the law. Quickly he tried to remember the name of the man who had healed him, but he couldn't. The healer's name had not seemed important. That he was healed was what was important. It was not until later that he discovered Jesus' name - then he ran to tell the religious leaders what they wanted to know.

It is a curious story - of this there can be little doubt. Let me briefly spell out two reasons I believe this story is so curious.

4

First of all, Christ's healing was absolutely unconditional. The poor man did not have to do one blessed thing. He didn't even have to believe in Jesus. Wholeness was simply given to him.

What do you think about God acting unconditionally? Doesn't an unconditional God go against the way things work? We are more familiar with "conditions"...more acquainted with dealing with God and one another in terms of, "If... then." "**If** you will do what I ask, **then** I will love you. **If** you have faith, **then** I will save you." We tend to believe we have a role to play in salvation. But are you aware that a conditional salvation focuses upon what we can do...not on what God does! It is what God does that matters most.

As we look at this story about the man at the pool of Bethzatha, Jesus did not ask the man to do anything, did he? Jesus made him "whole" as a completely unconditional gift - purely and simply. There was no precondition that said he must first have even an ounce of faith. Instead, a no-strings-attached gift was given. The initiative was and is and forever will be with God, never with us!

5

The **second** reason this story may sound curious is because it asks us to rethink our longings.

2

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were, on the whole, very righteous people. They kept their eye on the ball. They knew how to observe the Sabbath. Jesus himself called them righteous. But, in their microscopic focus upon the law, they were in real danger of making themselves God-blind.

Let me explain what I mean by talking about two aspect of their (and potentially our) God-blindness. **First**, instead of seeing scripture as a tool to help them worship God, they had fallen into worshipping scripture.

Joseph Harrison Jackson, a remarkable African-American preacher of the last century, worked a forty-acre farm in Mississippi when he was a child. He said he and his family made use of the bright light from the sun as they worked the fields...but they did not gaze at the sun. They knew that would blind them.

Jackson said that too often people spend a whole lot of time and energy looking at the sun rather than at what the light of the sun allows them to see. "People can go God-blind and miss the purpose of their existence," he said.⁴

If I can use Jackson's analogy as a spring-board...sometimes we can focus so intently upon the scriptures that we forget the scriptures are the sun meant to help us see God everywhere. The Bible is not God. There is nothing special or holy about the scriptures in and of themselves...**unless** they point beyond the pages to God. One of the central messages Jesus wanted to convey was that too often religious people can go God-blind from focusing upon the letter of the law rather than its spirit.

In the case of the poor man healed by Jesus, the religious leaders focused on Sabbath laws that forbid any work. You see by carrying his mat and walking the man was "working" on the Sabbath. The religious leaders were so focused upon the law that they could not praise God when a man was healed after being ill for 38 years.

The **second** aspect of the religious leader's possible God-blindness had to do with thinking faith was mainly something **they** did...that faith was all about **their** righteousness.

To be sure, the Christian message is about our behavior, our righteousness. We will surely be judged by the way in which we treat our neighbor. How did Jesus put it elsewhere? "As often as you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me." Yes...our behavior, our righteousness matters.

But at a deeper level Christianity is about a relationship so intimate and so deep it surpasses all other relationships. Keeping the law is important...but it is not enough to know what we ought to do and then strive out of our own resources to do it. You see, Jesus' quarrel with the Jewish leaders was not about their good deeds. He didn't object to their goodness. At issue was their type of faithfulness that left no room for God.

6

So, on this 6th Sunday of Easter, AD 2019...on the day before a national day of remembering – is it possible you are remembering the wrong things...that you are so focused upon yourself that you are in danger of God-blindness?

Remember what the Innkeeper of Bethlehem said? "All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come – your destiny, your joy, your heart's desire. As for me, when he came, I missed him...I missed him."

God forbid that we miss him, too. So...may the Spirit of God disturb us when we need disturbing in order to keep us from God-blindness. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ The 4th verse is missing. Many ancient authorities add these words that have been identified from a number of found text fragments.

² Consider the following poem by Linda Pastan, *What We Want*.

*What we want
is never simple.
We move among the things
we thought we wanted:
a face, a room, an open book
and these things bear our names--
now they want us.
But what we want appears
in dreams, wearing disguises.
We fall past,
holding out our arms
and in the morning
our arms ache.
We don't remember the dream,
but the dream remembers us.
It is there all day
as an animal is there
under the table,
as the stars are there
even in full sun.*

³ Buechner, Frederick. 1979. *The Magnificent Defeat*. NY: Seabury Press, 68.

⁴ Simmons, Martha and Thomas Frank A. editors. 2010. *Preaching With Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*. NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 551. Citing a sermon by Joseph Harrison Jackson preached on May 12, 1950.