

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

“Do You Want To Be Healed?”

*Preached by the Reverend Anne F. C. Richards, Senior Assistant
6 Easter, May 9, 2010, John 5:1-9*

I spent several years working on diocesan staff at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in the city, and one of my weekly responsibilities was to preside at one of the noontime Eucharists that are held daily in a small chapel in the Cathedral. Since there were so many tourists in the Cathedral, and since Columbia and St. Luke's Hospital were nearby, these daily services drew an eclectic group.

If you've been to the Cathedral, you may have noticed the large black wooden box that's kept near the front doors. There are pencils and slips of paper with it and anyone can write their prayer requests and put them in the box. Whoever does that day's service then reads the prayer requests during the Prayers of the People. For some reason, the pieces of paper were really big – way bigger than they needed to be. Which meant that people had room to write down every single thing they wanted from God.

Typically people started out with an altruistic request: “Dear God, please give us peace in the world.” They would then move to an urgent personal plea, like “I need a new job; please help me get an interview.” But because there was so much room on the sheet, people seemed to feel compelled to fill it, so the further you got down the sheet, the more trivial the requests would be. It would not be unusual, for example, for the same person who had asked for world peace at the top to ask for a new SUV at the bottom. Maybe folks thought their prayers had more punch since it was a Cathedral – but it always struck me funny that people expected so much of God, and I always struggled to know what to read aloud and what requests to leave to the silent discretion of the Lord.

I think one of the hard truths of today's gospel is the fact that God does not meet our expectations. Not because He doesn't love us or because He doesn't want us to have what we need, but because that's not the way God works. He's up to something completely different. Let me try to explain.

In this part of John's gospel there are two healing stories back-to-back. This first one immediately precedes today's gospel and it's the story of the royal official who pleads with Jesus to heal his little son who is at the point of death. Jesus initially hesitates and criticizes the man for wanting a sign, a “product” as it were, but the man won't give up and says to Jesus, “I know you can heal him,” and so Jesus complies. In today's story, there is no request for healing. Nor is there any plea at all to Jesus. The healing happens completely at Jesus' initiative. And in neither story is there anything we can recognize as religious faith. The royal official and the unnamed man near the pool of Beth-zatha are not identified as Jews and they make no mention of God or of Jesus' real identity. The royal official is attached to Jesus' celebrity, the fact that he has a reputation as having the power to heal. The lame man is at the other end of the spectrum: He doesn't know Jesus from Adam and even after he is healed, he appears not to care.

If you've gone to the Bishop's Bible study, you know that all the way through John's gospel, the writer is trying to tell us what God is like. And about what a relationship with God looks like on the inside. It's about hidden things, invisible things. And so these two stories show us an

invisible truth: That whenever we talk about “the will of God” we are not talking about some secret master plan for our lives that God wants us somehow to discover and conform to. Rather, when we ask “What is God’s will?” the answer is always “God’s will is to heal us.” And God’s will for our healing is not dependent on our request for it. All of Jesus’ healing miracles were signs designed to show that one day, when God’s work is complete, everything will be healed. If you had to summarize the story line of the entire Bible in one sentence, this is what I think it would be: God is transforming the world in love, and one day God’s work will be complete. All of creation will be made whole, including us. This is what all the readings from Revelation that we have been having the past few weeks are about. The time when there will be a renewed cosmos and God will dwell with his people and there will be no more pain or travail and all our tears will be wiped away. The passage from Revelation that we have today so beautifully expresses that by saying that our union with God and each other will be so complete that we will all have the name “Jesus” written on our foreheads.

But we’re not there yet. And Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh. We know many blessings in this life, some of them dramatic and unexpected. But we no longer live in the age of miracles, when Jesus contravened the laws of nature to show the power of God. God does not come to rescue us from the circumstances of this mortal life, since we live in an imperfect universe and are all subject to death. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas has said, “God means to kill us all, and in the end He will succeed.” God does not rescue. He does not control the stock market. He does not keep the rain and the winds away for May Fair. He does not send SUVs floating down from the heavens. And to our grief, he does not keep terrorists in planes away from buildings. He does not bestow cures from diseases upon request. We want to be rescued, but God does not rescue. He does save, which is something bigger.

And that’s why today’s gospel story takes place on a Sabbath, and during the Passover. Because both the Sabbath – the seventh day of creation, when God rested from his work – and the Passover, when the Hebrew people were delivered from slavery – are powerful images of the completion

and healing, the final salvation, that God promises at the end of time. From the very beginnings of Judaism, observing the Sabbath by not doing any work at all was very important for humanitarian reasons – people needed rest, as did their beasts of burden, and the Jews believed that one day needed to be set aside for that purpose as well as to honor God. As time went on, the Sabbath observance became an important symbol of national identity, a way the Jews distinguished themselves from other people, and more and more laws were created to protect it. Eventually, the laws were so onerous that even Jesus (who generally upheld the law) believed that they defeated their original purpose. When he was criticized for healing people on the Sabbath because healing was technically “work,” Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” and – even more pointedly – “It rains on the Sabbath; the sun shines on the Sabbath; crops grow on the Sabbath; babies are born on the Sabbath! That shows that God works on the Sabbath to keep creation going and I participate in God’s work.” And even more pointedly still, he said, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” And so Jesus was called a Sabbath-breaker and a blasphemer since by these words he identified himself with God. This is one of the main reasons Jesus was killed: Because he challenged the symbolic system of his religion and questioned whether or not it was true to God’s intention for us. On that Sabbath day when he encountered the lame, blind, and paralyzed people at the pool at Beth-zatha, he was really saying, “This is a blind, lame, and paralyzed nation that no longer understands the true purposes of God.”

If all this sounds kind of silly to you, if you can’t fathom why Jesus’ adversaries could have taken his challenge to a bunch of blue laws so seriously, it’s worth remembering that Jesus continues to do the same thing today: He walks into our corporate life and break our deepest values. God knows that we are apt to worship the wrong things and so the gospel is a continual reminder that everything we love falls under the shadow of the cross and is put into perspective by it. Our love of country, our love of achievement, our love of money, our love of comfort, our love of family – they all fall under the shadow of the cross and are subject to the gospel demand that only God is worthy of our worship and that true life is found only when we

give ourselves away in service. I don't want to wreck your Mothers' Day, but even our love for our mothers falls under the shadow of the cross because it's subject to the very interesting implication of the Fifth Commandment, which is "Honor your father and mother," not "Love your father and mother." Because sometimes, life being what it is, it is not possible to love our parents. Still, we are commanded to honor them, which may be an even higher form of love. So our faith is extremely realistic about our corporate values and the institutional containers we keep them in. Always, our faith is asking of us, "Does this relationship, this effort, this value, this community conform to and participate in God's will for healing?"

Of course, Jesus also walks into our individual lives and breaks through whatever keeps us from wholeness and true life – at least he tries to. That's the other part of what is going on in the gospel story today: The pool by the Sheep Gate was fed by an underground spring, which made the water in the pool bubble up from time to time. But people didn't know that it was fed by a spring, so they thought the occasional bubbling up of the water was a miraculous, supernatural thing and that you could be healed of any affliction you had if you could get into the water before the bubbling stopped. In other words, they believed that salvation was in the pool.

Now, the lame man has been dragging himself to the edge of that pool every day for 38 years. Do the math. That's 13, 528 days. In 13, 528 days he has not once been able to make it into the water. I sense a little ambivalence here, how about you?

And so Jesus asks him: "Do you **want** to be made well?" And the man's response is so telling. He doesn't answer really the question. He externalizes his situation and he says, "No one gives me a hand! They all push me out of the way! It's their fault I haven't been healed!" Now Jesus could have said, "Now look, buddy, don't blame other people for your passivity and lack of initiative. No one is going to do it for you." He doesn't run the guy through the psychological wringer. He doesn't scold him or correct him. He simply heals him because Jesus knows he needs to be healed. Jesus shows him where salvation really is: in him, in Jesus.

Jesus still walks among us, effecting another kind of healing, an invisible one, mending whatever in us keeps us out of relationship with him and with a full, true life. And there is something in each of us that does that, that holds us back. We are all lame in some sense, all of us waiting for someone else to do it for us, or for circumstances to change so that life is easier and more fulfilling. We don't see ourselves as clearly as we think we do.

Remember Joey the kangaroo? He's visited us a number of times in the spring, part of that traveling "petting zoo" that Rhonda arranges for the kids. I talked with the owner of the zoo about Joey last year. She has brought up Joey with her own children. He lives in their house; he has his own room with a TV in it. He eats at the table with them. And here's the really interesting thing: She told me that under no circumstances can they let Joey get anywhere near a mirror. He saw one once, and so of course he saw himself, and he freaked out, he went crazy – because he thought he was a human. He hadn't ever seen who he really was before. And when he saw himself as he really was, he was scared.

You don't have to be a kangaroo to not want to see yourself as you really are. When we catch a glimpse of ourselves in the mirror, so to speak, we don't like what we see. If I were asked if, in all my years as a priest, if there were one problem that people have most – that would be it. An alienation from self, or even a hatred of self that wreaks all kinds of havoc in life: addiction and depression and aggression and disconnection from other people, even the ones we love most. I think this is the biggest obstacle to prayer and meditation for most of us, because when you sit down to pray in silence, when all the distractions have fallen away, you are left with yourself.

The good news is that our mirror is Jesus. When we look at ourselves as we really are, we see Jesus looking back at us – not correcting, not scolding, not analyzing, but healing us. When we look at ourselves as we really are, we see Jesus shining back at us: "Stand up, take up your mat, and walk."

We no longer live in the age of miracles. We no longer live in a time when the hand of Jesus

contravenes the laws of nature to show the power of God. But the power of God abides. And Jesus still walks among us, offering us what is probably the greatest miracle of all: the healing of our hearts and souls. This is what salvation really is. As the story of the lame man shows, you don't even have to ask for it. If you want it, it is yours.

Do you want to be made well?