



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost      November 13, 2016**

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### **“Taking the First Step”**

*(John 5:6)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“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?’” (John 5:6).*

**COLLECT:** O Lord, almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Rule and govern our hearts and minds by Your Holy Spirit that we may live and abide forever in Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

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Most scholars had long dismissed the existence of this pool. Outside of this mention here in John there's been no other evidence for it. Most thought the pool must be some sort of metaphor, but not a historical site. Other scholars argued John's Gospel must have been written much later by someone who had no first-hand knowledge of Jerusalem. But then some archaeologists started digging around, and sure enough, they found this pool with its five colonnades, five covered porches just as John describes it. It's trapezoidal in shape. It has steps in each corner, so that people could get down into the water. It might have been fed in part by an intermittent spring.

There's superstition surrounding this pool. People believed that whenever the surface of the water was disturbed, it indicated the presence of an angel. At that moment, they believed the water had sudden curative powers, but only for the first person to get in. So, the sick gathered around the pool watching and waiting and when the water was agitated, everyone scrambled in.

We scoff at the superstition, but yet today, wherever there are natural springs, there are folks who are convinced the water has curative powers. A number of years ago my brother and I were hiking a mountain outside of Denver. There was a spring there that had been turned into a sort of Catholic shrine because of its curative reputation. It quenched our thirst, but nothing more. In fact, this Lutheran came down the mountain with a brand new double ear infection.

In any event, I like this guy in our text. His story is only fourteen verses long, but he's one of the more memorable characters in the Gospels. He's been sick for 38

years, and has spent most of those years sitting by the pool of Bethesda. 38 years! It's been his life's work: four decades, lying on a mat, waiting, hoping for a miracle to come from that pool. For 38 years he's been trying to be the first one in. "No one will help me" he explains to Jesus. "Someone always jumps in ahead of me" he complains. It'd be funny if it weren't so pathetic. I want to problem solve for him, "Why don't you sit closer? Maybe keep one leg in just in case? Build a slide?"

Around the pool are other needy people. . . the blind, lame, paralyzed. So he and his sick friends gather every day and sit in the sun together. They complain about their aches and pains, about how tough it is, how bad the economy is. They complain about the outsiders with their minor maladies muscling their way into the pool before any of the regulars can even get off their mats. They complain about crooked government and the rigged elections of Herod and Pilate. They complain about the soaring costs of health care. They shake their heads about the morals of the younger generation. Long ago, they resigned themselves to this life by the pool, and have learned to accommodate it. I think they have a pretty good time there actually, and I don't think all of them are really interested in change. This man has been there for 38 years. It's home! He has friends there, and passers-by give alms enough to buy bread every day, a little extra during the religious holidays. At times it can actually be rather pleasant, lying there by the pool in the sunlight, people watching, kvetching. Notice, he doesn't ask Jesus for healing. It works the other way: Jesus intrudes into this man's life. Verse 6, "When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'"

What kind of question is that?! They trained us at the seminary to never ask such presumptuous questions. They trained us to say things like, "You must be in a lot of discomfort. It must be discouraging for you sitting there all these years." They told us to "shut up and listen." But Jesus dispenses with all that and simply asks, "Do you want to be

made well?”

By the way, Jesus never mentions the superstition about the pool. He never acknowledges the pool's healing power. It's of no interest to him. Notice, he also ignores the man's condition. We never do learn what the nature of his problem is, only that he's been there for 38 years, being victimized by it. But I think part of his problem at least is fear. I'm speculating of course, but I think he's scared to death. Afraid to change. Afraid to take any chances. He's resigned. He's paralyzed, at least mentally and spiritually. There's no commitment to do anything . . . just day in, day out resignation to his fate. He probably thinks this is God's will for him. Or maybe he thinks it's just a long streak of bad luck. For 38 years he just hasn't been able to catch a break. So he's given up caring about his own life, its value, its purpose, its potential.

And I think Jesus finds the whole business irritating. Usually people come to him for healing, and he is gentle and kind and generous. But Jesus has to initiate this conversation. He asks him, "Do you want to be healed?" And when the man starts to whine about how he can't get into the pool quickly enough, Jesus interrupts him: "Take up your bed and walk."

And to his everlasting credit, the man does just that. He takes a risk. He takes the first step away from his victimization, away from the security of life on his mat, away from the comfortable dependence on the charity of others, and the camaraderie and mutual support of the community of suffering around the pool. He takes the first step and it required courage to do that.

My mom and her friends are of the age when there are lots of aches and pains and other various and revolting developments. Mom noticed it was becoming a little tedious talking about their maladies all the time. So one day she proposed, "How 'bout we limit ourselves to five minutes? For five minutes we can talk about our illnesses, but then after that it's strictly off limits." I asked her about it this last week: Was that five minutes per individual, or for entire

group? She answered “for the group, and I should have said two or three minutes.”

I really admire those who don't define themselves by what they can no longer do. They make decisions day in and day out not based on their limitations and maladies, but on their potential, on what they can still do. And I think that's part of being who God wants us to be, no matter where we are in life, young, elderly, or in our prime. God has meaningful work for us to do all of our lives, not just for the prime of our lives. But being who God wants us to be doesn't happen automatically.

In nature an acorn will become an oak, and a kitten will become a cat, and it all happens fairly automatically. But as humans we don't become who God wants us to be automatically. We don't get there simply by putting in our time. We get there by our day to day decisions, taking the first step every day to make something good happen. We become who God wants us to be by countless and deliberate decisions, some of them large, most of them small. We become who God wants us to be when we make choices with the welfare of these children in mind, for instance, or this church, or this family, or this city. It all requires a certain amount of change, and courage, and lots of first tentative steps. And it starts when deep down we know our lives matter, and they have meaning, and how we live them out can have a tremendous impact on the world around us.

But we're not going to get there if we think of ourselves and define ourselves only as a victim. Somehow we've come to the point where if we're not happy or healthy or prosperous, it has to be the fault of something or someone . . . the employer or the government or the pharmaceutical company or the neglectful parent. It seems everybody's vying for a crown of thorns. And, truth be told, sometimes there are unique payoffs to being a victim. Sometimes it's in the form of cash, or attention, pity. You get to put your own problems first. You don't have to worry so much about the problems of others.

This man is sick. He's been sick for 38 years. He

can't make it into the pool. But he's been living for 38 years. Certainly, he must have some vigor to him, but the sense of it is that he's resigned himself to the status quo. He really can't see living any other way. This man was waiting for life. Life will begin, he thinks, when I'm finally well.

Sometimes we all think like that. "Someday I'll spend more time with my family, or read more books, or lose ten pounds, or stop drinking so much. But I can't do it right now."

Someday I'll start praying more and reading Scripture more and really engage in the life of the church, but I just can't do it now; it will have to wait.

Someday, I'll be active in the community, I'll put to work in the community what I've learned on the job. Someday I'll make an appointment with a doctor, or marriage counselor, or minister. Someday I'm going to deal with this self destructive habit . . . but not now.

In the 4th century before he became a Christian Augustine was pretty much living it up. "The sin in me was foul" he writes. "But I loved it." "Fix me, Lord" he prayed, "but not yet."

Jesus intrudes on this man's life, and asks, "Do you want to be made well?" He violates common courtesy as well as political correctness. He cuts through the smoke screen, cuts through the whining and complaining and all the excuses; he looks the man in the eye and asks, "Do you want to be made whole?" If so, "Take up your bed and walk."

Do you want to change? If so, do it. Change. Now. Today. "Pick it up and walk."

That's what this man did. To his everlasting credit he took a risk. He took the first step.

Do you want to be made well? Do you value the meaning of your life enough to start living it again? It's always easier to stay there by the pool, I know. It's always easier not to change. The weight of custom and habit is heavy on us all. But to you and me Jesus has a word, "Stand up. Take your mat and walk." Take the initiative. Take the first step toward becoming the person God wants you to be.

The task ahead isn't so much to find something worth loving, but to start loving that which has already been given you to love.

There's a postscript to this story. Days later Jesus bumps into this man again. This time it's in the temple. And Jesus says to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." (Jesus is kind of churlish with this fellow, isn't he?) And what's that about anyway? What did he mean "sin no more?" There's no indication about the sin Jesus is alluding to. And if the fellow had been lying around on that mat for thirty-eight years, the range of possibilities as far as sin goes are fairly limited. Unless. . . unless the sin has something to do with lying around on a mat all those years . . . wasting his life, cheapening the precious life that had been given him by the way he lived it.

What's cheapening your life? What's cheapening your life? To you, to me, to us all, "Go and sin no more. Pick up your mat and walk."

After he became a Christian, Augustine started studying theology and philosophy. He threw himself into his work, and became the bishop of the church in North Africa, and one of the most important theologians of the church. He gave up his former way of life and found he didn't miss it. In fact, in one of his prayers he said, "Too late have I loved thee, O Lord" referring to all the life he missed while trying to satisfy his own desires. "Too late have I loved thee, O Lord." But in truth, there is no such thing as "too late" in life, not with Jesus. By grace, he makes the incomplete life complete. With his redemption, he redeems our wasted days. With his forgiveness he gives us our lives back, gives us new opportunities to start again, to live again.

This passage isn't just about Jesus saving some guy next to a pool from a meaningless, hopeless existence. This passage is about how Jesus has saved you and me from a meaningless, hopeless existence.

As Jesus intruded into this man's life with grace, so he has intruded into your life with grace. Jesus takes the first step for us. At your baptism, he converted you from being a victim

of inherited sin, to an heir of God and co-heir with Christ. In the Lord's Supper, he intrudes again and again and gives us the gift of his body and blood. It changes us. It cleanses us from all sin, and strengthens us for service. Jesus takes the initiative with us all our lives. The intrusive grace that entered that man's life has entered your life and mine. He takes the first step for us, and also the last one too, and walks with us through death into eternal life.

Jesus knew this man could become so much more than what he was. So also he sees more potential in us than we see in ourselves. And He loves us enough to intrude graciously and says this day to you and me, "Stand up. Take your mat and walk." Amen.