

### **“Laws or Love?” – John 5:1-9**

“It’s not fair! It’s just not fair! How can I ever be the first to get into the pool, when I can’t even move? How can I be the first one in when there’s always someone else ahead of me, even on the Sabbath, when they should all be at worship? For years I’ve been trying to get healed, and there’s simply no way it can happen. It’s just not fair!”

I think we could excuse the paralysed man at the Pool of Beth-zatha for thinking such thoughts. I know that’s what I’d be thinking, consumed by frustration at trying for years, perhaps for the full thirty-eight years of the illness, to receive the miracle cure from God offered in the turbulent waters of the Pool. The legend was that the first person into the pool after the waters started to swirl (churned by an angel, they say) would be healed, and he had seen it happen with his own eyes. But how could he possibly be the first one in? Every time, someone stronger beat him out. How could you call that fair? The very ones who most needed the cure were the very ones who weren’t able to find it.

So when Jesus came along and asked him, “Do you want to be made well?”, I’m surprised that his response was as muted as it seems. “Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool”, he begins. I’d probably have replied with some smart-alec response, you know the kind, “No, I’m just waiting here for the towel boy!”, and would thus most likely have lost the opportunity for healing offered by Jesus.

However, this exchange with the paralytic man is a classic example of how John in his gospel liked to present a “sign act” of Jesus. “Do you want to be made well?”, Jesus asks, and that question is loaded with irony. While we are already twitching with excitement at the hidden meaning of that question, of being made ‘well’ in the sense of being saved from sin, restored not just to physical health but to spiritual health as well, the man of course responds at the obvious level, understandably wanting to be healed of his paralysis, and we find the irony delicious.

By a “sign act” I mean those incidents that John loved to focus on, incidents that were signs of the power of God at work in Jesus – the changing of the water into wine being the first illustrated in his gospel. This is also a classic example – all the initiative is with Jesus. It is Jesus who opens the dialogue, and the focus is upon Jesus. We don’t know who the paralysed man is, or anything about his background except that he had been ill for thirty-eight years, which gives his age as being at least thirty-eight, an important fact giving him status as a witness later in the story. This incident is about Jesus, and the power of God at work in him, not about the invalid or his life situation. It is definitely not a “Your faith has made you well” story – as we soon find out (v.13) the man didn’t even know who had healed him, and when he learned it was Jesus, he even testified against him as a Sabbath breaker (v.15).

So, if it’s not a story about being healed through faith or belief in Jesus, what then is it about? It’s about Jesus revealing in himself the power of God at work even on the Sabbath. You would think that there would be universal rejoicing by all that this poor unfortunate, ill and immobilized for so many years, was not only able to stand, but was able to walk and even carry his mat as Jesus had commanded. (Those of us with knee problems can REALLY relate!) You would think that such a miracle would be the cause for celebration, happiness, joy and thanksgiving at the instant cure. But unfortunately, as is so often the case, the reaction was anything but joyful. With a pinched focus narrower than an old-time Calvinist, the Jews who observed his new athletic abilities charged instead, “It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” Can you imagine?! Here he is, walking for the first time in almost four decades, and instead of rejoicing, they charge him with breaking the Sabbath! Good grief!

It’s a little disappointing to hear the man’s response to that charge. Instead of counter-challenging those who were accusing him of breaking the law, and pointing out to them the miracle they were witnessing, he fell back on that tired old defense we’re hearing a lot on CNN these days, “I

was only following orders!” “The man who cured me told me to do it”, he weaseled, but since he didn’t know who Jesus was, he couldn’t identify him.

The story would have been left there, except for a subsequent encounter when Jesus again met the man, this time in the temple, and gave him a cryptic warning, “do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” Could this have been because the man was already in trouble for breaking the Sabbath following his miracle cure? We don’t know, can’t know. It seems unlikely that Jesus was issuing a threat that something worse than being paralyzed would be visited upon the poor ex-invalid should he sin – he was already a three-times victim: being paralyzed; a long-time victim of a terribly unjust and unfair healing process at the Pool; and now a victim of a religion that honoured rules or laws over human need. I tend to hear Jesus’ warning to him as being compassionate, a “watch out, they’re looking for a way to get you” kind of advice, but then I’m biased about believing in Jesus’ compassion and kindness.

The man’s next reaction is the one that is puzzling, and yet at the same time all too human and even common. The first thing he did upon discovering that it was Jesus who healed him was to go and tell the Jews. Maybe he was under some punishment; perhaps he had struck a deal with the Jews that he would get pardoned if he fingered the one who had done this dastardly deed on the Sabbath, of all days. Whatever his motivation, it seems a bit unappreciative for him to ‘rat out’ Jesus so quickly.

But isn’t that the same kind of reaction that is stirred up today by acts of kindness that violate rules or laws of religions? The greatest flaps in the history of the Christian faith seem to center around these kinds of issues. This kind of unforgiving and unaccepting behaviour began even as the Church began, with deep and passionate arguments about whether the Gentiles were even eligible to be saved by Jesus. Arguments about whether ‘true’ Christians could even associate with, eat with, drink with Gentiles were settled by God as he showed both Peter and Paul the way he wanted them, and the rest of the faithful, to go. The tyranny of slavery was endorsed for centuries by the Church, proclaimed as scriptural ‘law’ overruling even the kind of compassion shown by Jesus as he freed the paralytic man. One does not have to go very far afield in the Church today to find those who are aghast at Christ’s love and compassion being actively displayed to the benefit of those who are declared to be “outside the law”, for example (but not limited to) the gay and lesbian community. There seems to be no limit to the ways and the reasons that many in the modern Church will find to exclude people, to declare people as unworthy of God’s love in Christ, to find some rule or law to apply to keeping people from being healed by a word from Jesus.

The evidence from John’s gospel is much different. Not only did Jesus heal the paralytic man on the Sabbath in violation of the Sabbath laws, he went on to proclaim and demonstrate that this was God’s power at work in him. “Scandalous!”, cried those who loved their rules and laws. “This cannot be – these are God’s laws!”, they shouted. But Jesus claimed, and proved in his death and resurrection, that the love of God at work in him superseded even the narrowest of understandings of his rules and laws. “Such healing could only happen through God”, Jesus went on to claim, “and thus even if performed on the Sabbath, breaking the laws, it is still God’s work and God is still at work in me”.

God is still at work in Jesus, now the risen Christ. God’s love and compassion and mercy, a love so strong that He would offer His only Son as a sacrifice to redeem all who would call upon the name of Jesus, is still at work. As Jesus said to the Jews, I say to you: God is still at work, and still at work in His Son Jesus. His healing, reconciliation, peace, comfort, strength, patience, love, compassion, caring, energy are still given to us by a word, just as Jesus gave the word of healing to the paralytic man. “Take up your mat and walk”, is as valid to us today on this Sabbath day as it was to that man by the Pool on that Sabbath day.

We should realize that the challenges the paralytic man faced are still there for us today. As we pick up our mats, and tell people that it was Jesus who told us to do so, who told us to respond to him just as he told that man to respond even if it was in violation of the Sabbath law, we will run into similar opposition. “That’s not right!”, people will cry, as we proclaim Christ’s healing mercy and acceptance of all. “You can’t do that!”, the uptight upright will protest, trying to limit God’s love and power to fit their narrow and exclusive perspective. We will have to choose whether we see God defined by laws, or as love.

I believe the evidence is pretty clear from scripture, from the life and the words of Jesus, who broke the law by healing the paralytic even on a Sabbath, who violated the laws of association by speaking with a foreign woman at a well, who not only broke the law but offended the righteous by eating and drinking with sinners. The evidence is also pretty clear from the fact that while we too were yet sinners, Jesus first approached us, and spoke to us, and called gently to us, “come, and find peace” as he wrapped us gently in his arms, breaking all the laws and traditions.

Thank God we have such a Saviour who would exercise God’s love over the laws, for without Him we would be doomed, but with Him and through Him and because of him, even Christ Jesus our Lord, we are saved.