

**Reading from the New Testament: John 5:1-9**

*A Healing Love*

Sunday, May 9

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I know a particular young man who is in need of healing. For most of his life, from childhood to adulthood, he has been in need of healing. His brokenness is the result of many factors ... he wasn't even six when his parents divorced ... of course it wasn't his fault ... but at that age if you don't understand something so life-changing, something so horrible that it takes your young breath away ... you begin to blame yourself and to wear the guilt of shame.

You begin to wonder ... do my parents still love me. You see, a child can't comprehend the complex reasons of a breakup. Oh sure, both of his parents had issues ... you might say extreme dysfunctional behaviors ... but that doesn't matter to a 5-year-old. When you're emotionally abandoned ... when you cry yourself to sleep at night ... when the pain overwhelms you and there is no one to listen to you ... to understand the ache deep in your heart ... when your life is suddenly turned upside down ... sometimes you begin to turn inward and your heart begins to harden.

You are afraid to trust anyone ... you are afraid of commitment ... because the last thing you want to experience again is that kind of loss ... and the pain that accompanies it. And since his wounds didn't heal ... he began to seek out other ways to escape the pain he felt ... bursts of anger ... drinking binges ... drugs ... anything to take away the feelings of low self esteem ... anything to keep from coping with the reality of his life ... which unfortunately is spiraling down and down. He's a young man in need of healing. He's a young man who needs to be reminded that he is loved.

You can say the same thing about the man in our Gospel reading this morning. He's in need of healing, too. For 38 years he's sought healing in the waters of the Bethesda pools. But no one has helped him ... that is until that one day ... when Jesus Christ walks into his life.

Listen now for the word of our Lord speaking words of healing to your heart, from the fifth chapter of John, verses 1-9. I will be reading from Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*.

**1** Soon another Feast came around and Jesus was back in Jerusalem.

**2** Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there was a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, with five alcoves.

**3** Hundreds of sick people - blind, crippled, paralyzed – were in these alcoves.

**5** One man had been an invalid there for thirty-eight years.

**6** When Jesus saw him stretched out by the pool and knew how long he had been there, he said, "Do you want to get well?"

7 The sick man said, "Sir, when the water is stirred, I don't have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in."

8 Jesus said, "Get up, take your bedroll, start walking."

9 The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off.

This is the Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Try to imagine this story. In the heart of Jerusalem, for 38 years, a crippled man has been crawling to the pools of Bethesda ... where he would lay there all day ... just hoping someone would come along and carry him down to the healing waters.

It has been said that at certain times an angel will stir the waters ... and if you happen to be one of the lucky ones in the water at that moment ... whatever needs healing ... will be healed. The only trouble is that these pools aren't covered by the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Take a look at the picture on the front of your bulletin. The pools are way down there at the bottom ... the steps are steep ... if you are lame, someone will have to carry you ... you won't be able to make it down there yourself. And because everyone is more concerned about themselves ... those able to walk just step over those who cannot ... no one is willing to help. And this guy's not the only person with problems waiting to be healed.

There are plenty of other paralyzed and blind people who have come ... hoping to be cured in the waters of Bethesda. But then one day ... Jesus is passing by the pools. The crippled man doesn't even know who Jesus is ... he doesn't yell out to him. But Jesus knows something about him. Jesus knows he's been waiting a long time to be healed. And the heart of Jesus reaches out in compassion.

Jesus asks him ... "Do you want to be healed?" Now that seems like a rather crass question. Why would Jesus ask the poor man ... crippled for 38 years ... if he wants to be healed? Of course he wants to be healed. Why else would he come to the pools and their healing waters? For crying out loud, he's been going there for 38 years. And yet ... look how he answers Jesus. He doesn't say yes, I want to be healed ... he doesn't get excited at the prospect of being healed . . . no ... instead he blames everyone else around him for his predicament.

"If only someone would take the time to stop and carry me down the steps, then I could get to the water. But no one will do it. They keep on stepping over me." I think he's mad at all those people who come and step over or walk around him. And I even wonder if he's ever made the attempt to even ask one of them to help him.

Sometimes people go through life and expect everyone around them to know what they're thinking. Do you know what I mean? Something is going on inside of you that needs to be

healed ... you're facing some kind of financial trouble ... you're going through depression ... you're grieving the loss of a friend or spouse ... you're worried sick about a child or a friend ... you're scared about growing old ... your parents don't have a clue about the problem you're facing at school ... and it seems that people just step over you ... no one seems to care for you or pay you any attention.

Maybe you just want to scream out ... "Can't you tell what's going on inside of me? Don't you know what I need? Isn't it obvious to you? What do you mean you don't know I'm upset ... or mad ... or depressed ... do I have to tell you everything? Can't you see it on my face? Can't you hear it in the tone of my voice? Can't you see it in my eyes?"

And like that crippled man who's been sitting there for 38 years ... no one stops to help. And the pain continues ... sometimes pouring out in unhealthy ways ... just like the young man I told you about who is in so much need of healing. That is ... until Jesus comes into his life ... and into yours.

You see ... Jesus recognizes that the lame man needs healing. And in that moment, he models for his disciples ... and for us ... what it means to look into the heart of someone in pain ... someone who is suffering ... and to overlook any imperfections ... and reach out with love and compassion. It might be your wife or husband ... it might be your child ... it might be your best friend ... or perhaps a stranger ... or even your mother-in-law.

The heart of these words of scriptures is all about responding to someone who needs healing ... responding with the love of Christ ... just simply responding with the love of Christ ... and in doing so ... in the name of Jesus Christ ... you, too, can share the gift of healing just like Jesus did at the Bethesda pool.

I want to share a powerful story with you that is told by Brennen Manning in his recent book, *Furious Longing for God*. It's a story worth hearing about the power of healing in Jesus Christ. "Back in the late 1960s, I was teaching at a university in Ohio and there was a student on campus who by society's standards would've been called ugly. He was short, extremely obese, he had a terrible case of acne, a bad lisp, and his hair was growing like Lancelot's horse – in four directions at one time.

He wore the uniform of the day: A T-shirt that hadn't been washed since the Spanish American War, jeans with a butterfly on the back and of course, no shoes. "In all my days, I have never met anybody with such low self-esteem. He told me that when he looked in the mirror each morning, he spit at it. Of course no campus girl would date him. No fraternity wanted him as a pledge.

"He walked into my office one day and said, his lisp evident, "Ah, you're a new face on campus. Well, my name is Larry Malaney and I'm an *athgnostic*." "I said, "You're what?" "He repeated himself and I said, "Wow, congratulations! If you ever become an atheist, I'll take you to dinner and we'll celebrate your conversion." "The story I'm about to tell you is what Larry got for Christmas one year.

"Christmas came along for Larry Malaney and he found himself back with his parents in

Providence, R.I. Larry's father is a typical lace-curtain Irishman. Now there are lace-curtain Irish and there are shanty Irish. A lace-curtain Irishman, even on the hottest day in summer, will not come to the dining room table without wearing a suit, usually a dark pinstripe, starched white shirt, and a tie swollen at the top. He will never allow his sideburns to grow to the top of his ears and he always speaks in a low, subdued voice.

"Well, Larry comes to the dinner table that first night home, smelling like a Billy goat. He and his father have the usual number of quarrels and reconciliations. And thus beginning a typical vacation in the Malaney household. Several nights later, Larry tells his father that he's got to get back to school the next day. "What time, son?" "Six o'clock." "Well, I'll ride the bus with you."

"The next morning, the father and son ride the bus in silence. They get off the bus, as Larry has to catch a second one to get to the airport. Directly across the street are six men standing under an awning, all men who work in the same textile factory as Larry's father. They begin making loud and degrading remarks like "Oink, oink, look at that fat pig. I tell you, if that pig was my kid, I'd hide him in the basement, I'd be so embarrassed." Another said, "I wouldn't. If that slob was my kid, he'd be out the door so fast, he wouldn't know if he's on foot or horseback. Hey, pig! Give us your best oink!"

"These brutal salvos continued. "Larry Malaney told me that in that moment, for the first time in his life, his father reached out and embraced him, kissed him on the lips, and said, "Larry, if your mother and I live to be two hundred years old, that wouldn't be long enough to thank God for the gift He gave to us in you. I am so proud that you're my son!"

"It would be hard to describe in words the transformation that took place in Larry Malaney, but I'll try. He came back to school and remained a hippie, but he cleaned up the best he could. Miracle of miracles, Larry began dating a girl. And to top it off, he became the president of one of the fraternities. By the way, he was the first student in the history of our university to graduate with a 4.2 grade point average. Larry Malaney had a brilliant mind.

"Larry came to my office one day and said, "Tell me about this man Jesus." And for the next six weeks, in half-hour increments, I shared with Larry what the Holy Spirit had revealed to me about Jesus. At the end of those six weeks, Larry said, "Okay."

In 1974, Larry was ordained a priest and spent the next 20 years as a missionary in South America, a man "totally sold out to Jesus Christ. Do you know why?"

It wasn't because of the six weeks of sitting in (my) office while I talked about Jesus. No, it was because of a day, long ago, during a Christmas vacation, standing at a bus stop, when his lace-curtain Irish father healed him.

That one moment between Larry and his father is the perfect embodiment of Jesus' love and the healing it can bring. Another word for that kind of healing is *grace ... or unconditional love ...* and it is a gift to us from Jesus Christ ... a gift we are told to share with one another. Because that's precisely the way God loves us ... always loves us ... and that is how our Lord and Savior has told us to love one another.

Because when we love one another that way ... when we are willing to reach out to someone in need of healing ... God's healing begins ... spiritual ... emotional ... eternal healing ... and it changes lives ... it brings wholeness. The truth is ... whether we're physically ill or not ... we ALL need the kind of healing Jesus brings into our lives.

Jesus Christ shared that kind of healing with that crippled man at the pool. Oh yes, he gave him physical healing ... he was able to walk ... but Christ's blessing did so much more for that man ... because his world of bitterness and self-pitying was now gone ... he had now been spiritually healed by the love of Jesus Christ.

As I told you earlier ... there is a young man I know who is in need of healing. His life is broken. He is in need of a Savior. And there is no doubt in my mind that there is someone you know who is also in need of the healing touch of Jesus Christ.

There is someone you know who needs your care and compassion. Which means we are both faced with a choice ... do we just step over the person in need and ignore them ... or do we stop and be willing to pick them up and carry them ... allowing the healing power of Jesus Christ to make them whole again.

I'll tell you what ... I'll pray for you to do the right thing ... if you will pray for me to do the right thing as well.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.  
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.  
In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.