

A gift of healing

John 9:1-5 (May 22, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

In our scripture reading today we have a story of Jesus healing. The story points to Jesus' power to give us life. Which always comes as a gift, unmerited, unexpected. It prompts us to reflect on our own lives – where we have already experienced healing, and where we have yet to receive it. It awakens longings within us, and points us to the source of all life and goodness.

Every one of us experiences illness in our lives. It's part of the human condition. From the common cold, to Covid, to cancer. From deteriorating joints to rashes on our skin. From things that affect our bodies, to conditions that affect our mental health, and things that afflict us spiritually as well. The gospel of John presents Jesus as the giver of life in all its fullness, the one who heals and makes us whole.



Artus Wolffort - Christ at the Pool of Bethesda, 17th Century.

In our story for today we find Jesus in Jerusalem during one of the Jewish festivals. He's at a pool, which was a gathering place for many invalids – blind, lame and paralyzed. But one man in particular caught Jesus' attention.



And we should stop right there and acknowledge the great *unanswerable* question: Why? Why this one? Why did he receive healing? Why him and not the others?

I don't really know what to say about that. It's true of Jesus' ministry that while he healed *many*, he did not heal *all*. Jesus declared the coming reign of God. And wherever he went there were signs that accompanied that proclamation: signs of healing, inclusion, restoration and abundance.

Were all healed, all fed, all restored? Did fullness of life come to everyone? The answer is no. But Jesus' presence was a sign that the transformative power of God had come to dwell among us. In Jesus, something new and marvellous had begun to happen.

Later in John chapter 5, which is where we find our story for today, Jesus says: "Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, (it's still in the future, but already beginning) when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."



I think of it this way: the incarnation of Christ is a pivotal point in human history. Like a fulcrum where life hangs in the balance, and Jesus tips it towards health and healing, goodness and love, justice and peace. Jesus tips the balance toward life.

I wonder how many of you have played this game? I'd get my younger brother to go on a teeter-totter with me. I told him it would be fun. But then, because I was bigger and heavier, I'd hold him up in the air. So he was stuck there!

Sometimes it seems the dark powers of the world have *us* stuck in the air, unable to do anything about it. But Christ leans into love and pushes back. So the lever starts to go the other way. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus tips the whole creation toward the fulfillment of God's loving purpose. It tips us all toward eternal life.

But how do we speak about the apparent randomness of the healing we experience? Well, we can rejoice when it happens. Be grateful when we receive it. And pray for the day when it will come to all!



Photo by Corey Balazowich,
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/coreyann/1517379547>



Now, let's get back to the story. Where a man has been waiting many long years – 38 to be exact. Can you imagine? Why, 38 years is half a life-time! And there he is lying on a mat by the pool - waiting, waiting. Waiting all this time.

What kept him there, I wonder? Was he hopeful or discouraged? What was the look on his face? Was it a look of despair, was he on the edge of giving up? Or was there an air of intensity, a gaze of steely determination? "I'm not going anywhere until I'm healed!"

I'm reminded of David Milgaard's story. He was a man who was wrongly convicted of committing a murder here in Saskatoon. He spent 23 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. 23 lost years, during which he suffered greatly. And during all that time his mother, Joyce Milgaard, advocated tirelessly on his behalf.



So what kept the man in our story waiting *so long* at the edge of the pool? Did he wonder if his life would ever change? Jesus asked the sick man, "Do you want to be made well?" You'd think the answer would be obvious. Instead he gave a long explanation of why it never happened. "Sir," he said, "I have no one to put me into the water."

He didn't have a Joyce Milgaard in his life. No loving family member, no friend. No one willing to assist him when the waters stirred, and the opportunity for healing presented itself.



You may have noticed that verse 4 is not included in our scripture reading. That verse is not in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts, and is probably not part of the original Gospel of John. It does, however, provide some useful background information.

It tells us that, every so often, a current moved through the water in the pool. It was believed that an angel came to stir the waters. And that whoever stepped in first, after the stirring, would be made well. So they all waited for this troubling of the water, anticipating its arrival. And when it happened (who knows how often) there would be a mad rush of invalids, hobbling and groping to find their way.

This man had *tried* repeatedly, tried to beat the rush, tried to be the first to enter the water. But he never made it. So he remained, biding his time, hoping that the next stirring might be for him. It's such a harsh reality. Such a competitive, almost "Darwinian" process survival of the fittest. Only the strongest, closest, quickest can make it into the pool. And only the least disabled can find relief for what ails them.



This man has no one to help. No one to wake him, or lift him up, or take his arm. No one to elbow others out of the way on the mad rush to the pool. He has no community.

And that lack of community is unhealthy to begin with. Isn't that one of the blessings we find here at church? That there's a people we can be part of. There's someone to lend an arm, a listening ear. Maybe take us to an appointment. Or check in every so often to see if we're OK. Certainly someone to pray for us – that much at least.



Remember another Bible story about a man who was healed? His friends went to extraordinary lengths, making a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was teaching. They lowered him down. He had community to help him. But here, this man has none. He is all alone.

Not to worry though. Healing, for him, will not come by way of the waters. No more waiting for an angel of the Lord. Instead, Jesus simply tells him to pick up his mat and walk. No more playing by the rules of the pool. Jesus short-circuits those rules by healing the man directly, immediately, in his own God-determined way.

The message of the Gospel is that Jesus is the source of all healing. God has given to him the power to restore our lives. His is the power of life for all humanity. He is the giver of life and health, wholeness and well-being.



I want you to notice something. *This* healing happens without any expression of faith. In that way it is indiscriminate. It could happen to anyone. It's not like you have to meet a certain standard in order to be healed. You don't have to take a test or qualify.

The man does not recognize Jesus to be a healer. The man expresses no faith in him. He does not call him Lord or Saviour. He does not reach out to him or ask for any form of help. Yet Jesus heals him anyway! Don't you find that remarkable?



Sometimes, when we don't experience healing, we're told it's because we didn't believe, or we didn't have enough faith. And of course that only makes us feel worse. But healing does not always depend on faith. Sometimes, certainly, faith *is* present. But in *this* story the man shows no discernable faith at all. And yet he's healed.

Afterward, he picks up his mat and walks away. Not a word of thanks! Not a bit of gratitude. He simply leaves. Later on in the chapter, the authorities stop the man and question him. They see him carrying his mat on the Sabbath, which was a transgression. "Who told you to do this?" they want to know. But the man has no idea. He hasn't even bothered to get Jesus' name!

Like so many of us, he's been blessed by God, but goes about his life more or less oblivious to that. Jesus is not part of the picture for him. It's as though we live in a shrunken-down world, completely unaware of larger, spiritual realities. And this is often how we live from day to day. We make our fortunes, or lose our fortunes, and God is never even part of the picture. We're very good at this – seeing the world in such a restricted, one-dimensional way.

Scripture says the heavenly Father “makes the sun to rise on *both* evil and good, and sends the rain on the just and unjust.”(Matthew 5:45) God’s blessings are given to all. They come as undeserved gift, pure grace!

Later in the story, Jesus meets the man again in the temple and tells him to “sin no more.” That’s because, according to the Gospel of John, the greatest sin is not recognizing the work of God. Not seeing the miraculous grace that flows through Jesus. Do you see it?



I wonder if any of you have been to Manitou Beach? The village website advertises: ““There’s just something about this place!’ ... It’s the feeling you get when you’re here. The amazing salt water of Little Manitou Lake is definitely the source of this magic.”¹



<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/manitou-beach-100-years-1.5209855>

It *is* pretty neat, I’ll admit. The high mineral content of the water means you can literally float on top of it. First Nations people have long recognized its healing properties. Today people mostly soak in the heated waters of the Manitou Springs Resort. The pool is said to promote healing. And there may well be truth to that. But our passage today reminds us that ultimate healing comes from God. What the man in our story needs is not the water of the pool. It’s the presence of God that makes us whole.



Healing may come to us in different times, in different ways. Healing from a headache. Or healing from a broken relationship. Healing from wounds of deep grief and loss. Or healing from a debilitating and crippling disease. It’s different for each one.

This passage invites us to consider the healing we need. And it prompts us to be grateful for that which we’ve already received. Most of all, it points us to the one who brings fullness of life. And it encourages us to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom in all its fullness.

There is a mystery to the healing that comes from God. It does not always arrive in the way we expect, or to those we care for most, or in the time that we would like. Sometimes we find ourselves waiting a very long time ... Even beyond the life we live here on earth. There is a mystery to God’s healing. But we do, surely, long for it.

The good news is that God is loving, and always faithful, and desires what is good for each one of us, and all of us together.

What is the healing you desire? Is Christ present in your life? What might he be saying to you this day? In the end, God’s life comes as an undeserved and unexpected gift, to be welcomed and received with thanksgiving.

¹ <https://www.watrousmanitou.com>, Accessed May 21, 2022.