

Let's Take Up our Mats
John 5:1-9
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Trinity Sunday

Rev. Nancy F. Dolan
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

New Testament Lesson: John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 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?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath.

After a mere two weeks with you, I am settling in, as is Kristie. Yet I am still very much in transition as I get to know you and the ministry we now share. I made the mistake one time of mentioning to God that I enjoyed transitions. Perhaps in the spirit of “be careful what you wish for” I recently found myself, along with my family, completely saturated in transitions. Even the dog has been trying to figure out what’s going on in the confusion. Carloads of boxes in the course of three weeks or so have been packed, unloaded and repacked multiple times as we’ve retrieved one daughter from college to home, then another from college to home, then moved that same daughter to Washington for an internship, until finally, those worn and weary boxes were filled and emptied yet again to move me here to First Presbyterian Church, Lake Forest. One significant transition after another, with more to come.

The piles of boxes that are standing by for their next mission have become symbols of exciting transitions for our family. Transitions *can* be special times,

certainly times of stress and change, and yes, of sweat and sore backs too, but also times of *excitement*, of *creativity*, and of *great possibility*.

Scripture is filled with transitions, that of a whole people as in the Exodus and the Babylonian exile; transitions of leaders, from prophets to kings, from strong leaders to weak, from benevolence to corruption. And many, many transitions in the lives of individuals: Abraham and Sarah having children in their elderly years; Moses, who describes himself as “slow of speech and slow of tongue” (Ex. 4:10), and then courageously leads the Israelites out of Egypt; and the conversion of each of the disciples along with all the early followers. The stories of transition in the Bible go on and on. It seems we can safely conclude that our God is a God of transition. And really, that makes sense, because the God we worship is always in the process of restoring and reconciling. God of transition.

So it shouldn't surprise us that churches go through transitions all the time. Pastors come and go, members are welcomed and sent, programs change, leaders change, even the wall color changes (one of the most disruptive transitions!) Right now the entire Church of the 21st century is experiencing significant transition. We're not our grandparent's church anymore. As John Buchanan referenced last week, we're experiencing the “500-year rummage sale”, a reference to church-authority Phyllis Tickle's observation that the church every 500 years goes through major upheaval, tossing much of the old as God makes us into something new. The broader Church today is going through such an upheaval.

Transitions between pastors, like we're going through, have drawn particular attention over the last decade because we've recognized that these times provide a unique opportunity to equip congregations for the changing 21st Century Church; a chance to develop adaptability and flexibility, to experiment and try new things, and to lean on God in ways that wouldn't happen while we're in our comfort

zones. So, instead of viewing interim times as the church in a “holding pattern” until the new pastor arrives, we now view this as a unique time for growth and opportunity. A time pregnant with promise.

But not every church successfully navigates this promising time. We’ve learned from those churches too though. We’ve learned that the success of congregations going through pastor transitions is generally dependent on three conditions:

- 1) The congregation’s willingness to heal – and that could be from loss, or division, or trauma of any sort;
- 2) The congregation’s commitment to spiritual growth and a new level of discipleship; and
- 3) The degree to which the congregation engages new energy and enthusiasm toward the core purposes of the church, their core identity.

We’ll be talking about these three over the next several months, but today I want to focus on the first: *the willingness to heal*. That this is on the list at all reminds us that we are not alone, all churches in transition have some need for healing. We are a body of human relationships after all. It’s natural for some to cause hurt and to wind up with some wounds. It is expected and right that we would grieve the loss of beloved pastors and other staff. Healing is an appropriate place to start for churches in transition. Discipleship is difficult enough when we’re in good health! Our healing as the body of Christ is necessary for us to fully engage in our core purpose in the world, and to grow spiritually.

So we must ask ourselves, “How *willing* are we to heal?” This is the question asked in today’s gospel lesson.

The scene opens with a man lying ill near a healing pool. It was thought in these ancient times that these pools had healing powers; that angels would come and stir

the waters and then the first person who stepped in the whirling waters would be healed.

But this man didn't make it into the pool. He tells Jesus he had no one to put him in there, or when he made his way there, someone would get in before him. He had been *so close to healing*, but not quite there. And this was the case for 38 years, which in that day was a lifetime - *until Jesus sees him*. Amidst all the people lying in the porticoes, and the text tells us there were many, Jesus sees him and says, "Do you want to be made well?"

Do you *want* to be made well?! That seems like a very unnecessary question. Really, Jesus? Of *course* he wants to be made well! But if we know anything about Jesus in the Bible, we know he's unlikely to ask unnecessary questions. He must be asking for a reason. We can guess that he wants the man to think about this, "*Do you want to be made well?*" In other words, are you willing to do what is necessary? Are you *willing* to let go of that which is keeping you from being made well?

For any of us who have been in some form of rehab before, this question does not seem so unusual. In fact, we know that this really is the pivotal question. Orthopedists, therapists, coaches and trainers are quick to tell you that your healing is ultimately dependent on your willingness to do what is necessary – part patience, part work. Rehabilitation – whether physical or emotional, whether due to trauma or injury or misuse, rehabilitation as a path to healing is *work*. And it takes *time*. And it often involves giving up old ways of being or doing.

The unnamed man in our gospel lesson has been in this state for a long time. It's going to take a lot of effort to get up and walk – his muscles won't be ready and his strength will be limited. In addition, getting up off his mat will be scary. He

will be stepping into the unknown - new relationships, new routines, new demands on him. Healing can mean stepping out of our comfort zones.

Have you noticed that sometimes the uncomfortable feels better than the unknown, even if the unknown means things might be better? We stay in jobs that deplete us because we've gotten comfortable. We stay in relationships that aren't good for us because they are familiar. Even dysfunctional families find comfort in their dysfunction because it's familiar and certain. So when Jesus asks this man who has been lying here for years, "Do you want to be made well?" he's asking him, and us, are you willing to be uncomfortable for a bit? Uncomfortable while your body heals, uncomfortable while you step out onto the unknown path before you, uncomfortable as you let go of what was familiar?

No one heals in quite the same way or at the same pace. But for all of us who are part of this church, healing will take patience and it will take stepping out of our comfort zones, and engaging, even in the chaos and confusion of change, while our wounds heal over time. Are we willing?

There is something more that strikes me about this story of healing, an important lesson for us today. This man, and all the others who are ill around him are all lying there waiting for what they believe will heal them; in this case, that they would be first in the swirling waters of restoration. They are waiting with their hope in *this answer* to their prayer.

We like having the answers. We like to think we know the answers. Our culture rewards expertise, self-sufficiency, quick action and quick response. We get frustrated when things don't go the way we thought they should, when we don't have the answer right away, or when our answer turns out to be wrong or rejected. In this lesson the *whole community* believed they had the answer in the healing pool. So much so that masses of people invested their lives in waiting

beside those waters for healing. But that was not the answer. Instead, Jesus is standing right there with them with a different source of healing.

The answer to our own healing may not be the answer we have in our mind – it may not be in the particular person, or vision, or program that we’ve been waiting for. Our healing may not come at the time or in the way that fits our agenda. God often surprises. In this story, Jesus healed on the Sabbath, at a time when that would be forbidden. Jesus acts in ways outside of our expectations. His healing doesn’t always follow the popular or predictable path.

Our own first step in our healing and transition will be guided by the BridgeBuilder report and recommendations. As Session begins the process of pouring through the focus group findings, as you are later invited to participate in developing the future plans, we may all be taken to places beyond our expectations. The answers may be different from what we think they should be, and outside of our comfort zones. But if we don’t go in with open minds, we may find ourselves stuck on our mats, steps away from the healing Christ offers us. Healing in Christ requires us, in our wounded-ness, to acknowledge that we don’t have all the answers. That we need God to get off our mats.

Which brings me to the last and most important component for the successful transition of a church – GRACE. One thing that is very clear in this story of healing, is that it was pure grace that healed this man. He never expressed any faith in Jesus’ power to heal him. He seemed to not even imagine that he could be well without the help of the pool. And after his healing he didn’t even express gratitude to Jesus. But out of pure, unconditional love, Jesus sees him, knows his need, and heals him. Just as he sees and knows and heals us.

My friends, by God’s grace we are being made well. It will take time. It will happen differently for each of us, at different paces and in different places, but in

Christ we all have the promise of wholeness and healing, the promise of renewed strength so that, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, we “shall run and not be weary” (Is 40:31).

So, trusting in God’s healing presence, let’s be gentle with one another, and let’s take up our mats and see where God takes us. May it be so.