

John 5:1-9 New International Version (NIV)

The Healing at the Pool

¹Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ²Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda^[a] and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ^[4]^[b] ⁵One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

⁸Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath,

John 5:1-9

On the sabbath, at a Jewish festival in Jerusalem, by a pool known for the healing properties of its waters, Jesus meets and heals a man who has been ill for many years, telling him to take up his mat and walk.

We've all heard this story many times haven't we... and different aspects will have jumped out at us or been focussed on by the preacher each time. Two similarities jumped out at me when from the two readings we've heard this morning – both events took place on the Sabbath and both took place near water. In those days, to do any sort of work on the Sabbath was taboo – a concept Jesus challenged when healing people – but that's not what we're thinking about today. Neither are we thinking about the aspect of water although I do find it fascinating how the healing properties of water have been recognised across so many sectors of society, past and present. In fact, the last service I led here was about the Living Water – remember that powerful passage from The Chronicles of Narnia read by Richard? Personally, I have always felt the need to be by water when life is tough or there are decisions to be made – it calms my soul and brings a new perspective allowing me to break through any prayer blocks I may have been feeling. What better place to live than on this beautiful island! But back to today's theme:

HOMILY

"Stand up, take your mat and walk." (John 5:8)

In the reading from John's Gospel we meet a man who spends his days, and possibly his nights, near a pool that was reputed to have healing properties. We have an insight into his suffering and maybe we can even empathise with aspects of it. He is chronically ill, but also friendless, lonely and marginalised, and possibly even bullied and abused. Any one of those on their own is tough – put them together and life must have been a minute by minute struggle. Surely someone could help him, once in a while, into the water? Yet no one is willing to touch him. To compound the man's suffering and isolation, he moves slowly and someone always barges ahead.

He's not the only one there, of course. The pool attracts many people with all manner of afflictions. The suffering in that place must have been overwhelming for anyone passing through who stopped long enough to take it in. Yet for all the bustle and busyness of the place, for some reason, on this particular day, Jesus in his wisdom singles out this particular man, asking him, "Do you want to be made well?"

You might wonder why Jesus asks this question. Surely it's what they call a "no-brainer"? Why on earth would anyone not want to be free from such misery? Yet it seems that one of the perverse aspects of human nature is that we can become so habituated to our suffering that it becomes engrained in us, a familiar habit that's hard to break, even when we are offered a way out. Psychologists call this "learned helplessness". **Learned helplessness** happens when people or animals become conditioned to believe that a situation is unchangeable or inescapable. (Perhaps it falls into the category of 'better the devil you know' or 'fear of the unknown'. What would life look like without that particular situation? Wouldn't it be great to be free from it... or would it? What's the new picture? Scary stuff.)

Yet even when we're stuck in this kind of pattern, we long for deep health and emotional healing. This man is surely in need of emotional and spiritual healing, as well as a physical cure. Jesus delivers all that in just seven words: "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

What lessons can we draw from this passage?

Firstly, Jesus' example can inspire us when we feel overwhelmed by the sheer scale of suffering in the world. In the face of its magnitude, even the healthiest and wealthiest among us might feel that our resources are meagre and be thwarted by a sense of inadequacy. So we hurry on through our lives, past the pool and along our streets, looking to neither left nor right, kidding ourselves that our own concerns and preoccupations are worthy distractions. The lesson is to watch Christ, as he steps with grace out of his own preoccupations, turns aside from his journey, and takes the time and trouble to see the man who needs to be seen, to speak to the man who needs to be addressed, and to say the words that he needs to hear. That takes great wisdom, discipline and practice — the practice of allowing the Holy Spirit to direct our lives, guide our actions and words, and show us the resources that we do have, rather than focusing on our limitations.

Secondly, we can use this teaching to think about our own "learned helplessness". Are we habituated to suffering, ignoring a possible way out? Could we live more fulfilling, God-centred lives if we listen to Christ and follow his command? If this is you, and you would value a prayer partner to support and encourage you, please feel free to access the prayer ministry available after the service or speak to someone in the church who you trust. We are a community that cooperates and helps each other... let's do so even more as help each other to access the Living Water and experience the deep healing that only Christ can bring.

Amen.