



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Just Two Feet Away”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 25: 31-40; John 5: 2-9

February 7, 2021

‘Just two feet away!’ As I read that passage from John during our Journey Through the Bible series a few weeks ago, that’s the phrase that kept running through my mind – ‘Just two feet away!’ This healing story that we get from John takes place on the Sabbath, and in the passage that follows what we just read, it leads to another of those embattled moments between Jesus and the Jewish establishment of the time – and, I’m going to put in a bit of a long-range teaser and let you all know that, come summer, we’re going to spend some time on those Sabbath conflicts and the manner in which Jesus’ response to those Sabbath questions he receives speak to our faith today. For today, however, I really want to focus on that man - ill for nearly 4 decades – laying beside that Beth-zatha pool.

To start, setting is key here. In Jerusalem, right by Sheep Gate (the location where the sheep were brought into the temple for sacrifice), there was a pool – more likely a natural reservoir of sorts – that would periodically start to stir. The belief was that, every time those waters agitated in that manner, it was the Spirit of God moving among the waters. The belief, then, was that the first person who stepped into those waters when they began to stir (and the first person only) would be healed of their infirmity. This is why all of those ill and injured people are camping out beside the waters – John’s list of the blind, the lame and the paralyzed. They all sat at that side of the pool hoping to be the one to be the first into the waters as the Spirit came upon them.

That’s the background of this story of Jesus healing this man. And that’s why, when Jesus approaches this man who has been ill for all those years and asks if he wants to be made well, the man’s response is very practical. We don’t know the exact nature of his illness – or what makes him so slow to reach the waters as they stir – but the result is that someone else always makes it in first. “Sir,” he says, “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.” ‘All I need,’ the man says, ‘is a little help getting into the water when the time comes.’

Now, the healing that follows is miraculous, and moving, and inspiring, and worthy of reflection. But, to be perfectly honest, as I read this passage a few weeks ago, I couldn’t get one image out of my mind – I simply couldn’t shake the picture of this man, just two feet away from those stirring waters, and yet seemingly miles from the healing for which he longs because there is simply no one willing to help him take that final step!

Remember, this pool is at the Sheep Gate to the temple in Jerusalem. This isn't some group of the lame and ill gathered at a pond out on the edge of town with no one around. This pool is at one of the primary entrances to the temple at the heart of one of the most populated cities in the Mediterranean Basin. People were everywhere! Walking by this man. Behind him. In front of him. Likely at times over him. When those waters stirred and this man began his desperate struggle to find the will and strength to reach those waters – he wasn't some forgotten outcast out of the sight of those around him. People were right there. People were watching him struggle. Every person in that area knew why he was there. Every person knew what it meant when those waters stirred. And every person who watched him as he clawed his way towards those waters knew what he was doing and why he was doing it – and no one stepped in.

Now, I know I'm painting a picture beyond the details that we have in this story, and there's plenty of others who were trying to get in these waters too. But, I simply could shake this picture of this man crawling that pool – just two feet away – as a passer-by nonchalantly steps right across his back with little regard for that which was going on right before his eyes. And, the more I pictured this man just two feet away from a new beginning in his life with no one there to help him take that final step, the more I found myself wondering how often, in our lives, we too miss out on those moments in which that small gesture of our good will could change the life of another in need. The more I pictured this man just two feet away from a new beginning in his life, with no one there to help him take that final step, the more I found myself wondering how often we are we that person nonchalantly walking by another who is just those two feet away from their own restoration and healing?

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that we are marred by heartlessness or act with callous disregard. I know for a fact that the vast majority of the people hearing these words this morning are kind-hearted, loving, giving, devoted people of faith who regularly seek to make a difference in the life of another. I don't in anyway way want to suggest otherwise. I do, however, think that the image of this man just two feet away from his new life – striving to take that final step – has a little bit to say to those lives of service and helping others that we seek to live.

First, I think it's a reminder that the needs are often so much closer than we notice. As we go about our busy lives, carrying on in the normalcy of our routines, it's incredibly easy to slowly begin to see the world through increasingly narrowed blinders without even realizing that that's happening. When I imagined an individual literally stepping over the back of this man as he clawed his way towards those waters, my first reaction was to the sheer madness of such blatant disregard for the humanity of another. The more I thought about it, however, the more I started picturing that same individual talking with a friend, reading a newspaper, or staring at a phone – and I was quickly reminded of how readily, be it unintentionally, we tune out the world as our blinders increasingly shade our sights from the reality that surrounds us. I don't in any way mean to suggest that we intentionally ignore the need before our eyes because we don't care, but I do suggest that the ever-narrowing blinders of daily living can all too often cause us to overlook the needs that surround us.

Second, and this is really my more central point for today – it's a reminder that not every new beginning takes a miracle. I think it's fascinating to consider that the reason that this man needs that delightfully miraculous healing of Jesus is not because Jesus was the only one who could bring that healing upon him, but that he had been unable to find that person willing to help him take those final steps to get from where he was to the wonder of where he could be. While most certainly blessed to receive it, the story implies that that man didn't need a miracle. What he needed was a helping hand to give him the strength and capacity to take those final steps towards a better tomorrow.

When I selected our passage from Matthew, that Julie read for us, it was not to get into it with any real depth. I think those words are familiar to many of us, and there's a lot of things about the whole sheep and goats notion that can grab our attention. What I really wanted us to hear, however, was the list that Jesus shares.

- I was hungry and you gave me food.
- I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.
- I was a stranger and you welcomed me.
- I was naked and you gave me clothing.
- I was sick and you took care of me.
- I was in prison and you visited me.

Take note, here, that none of these are miraculous, or frankly even particularly heroic, acts. Giving some food or drink. Welcoming someone. Visiting someone or sharing some clothes. Do any of these sound especially difficult? When Jesus celebrates those who have cared for others, he doesn't speak of grand and life-altering gestures that changed the course of the world. No, he talks about moments in which people ripped off their blinders, allowed themselves to see that person struggling right before their eyes, and then helped them make those last two feet between where they were and where they could be.

When I read that story from John and started picturing all of those people so heartlessly ignoring the pain of this man, I cringed. The more I stepped back from that judgment and simply reflected on the realities of humanity both then and now, however, my focus quickly turned from angst to possibility. Some people genuinely need the miraculous intervention of God in their lives – and our role in the playing out of those miracles is a conversation for another time. Many people, however, don't need a miracle. Many people simply need help with those last two feet. If we can shake off our blinders to see that need, and if we can have the faith to respond to that need, we may not change the world, but we can change a life – both theirs and ours!

Feeding the hungry... Clothing the naked... Visiting the lonely... Welcoming the stranger... Caring for the ill... The list goes on and on. But somewhere in our lives, right now, there is our man at the Beth-zatha pool – our person, right before our eyes, just two feet away from the new beginning towards which they've been clawing for years. And, all they need is a little help to take that final step. All they need is for us to shake off those blinders of our daily normalcy, to see the need that stands right before our eyes, and to have the faith and compassion to step in not to work grand miracles, but to change a life as we walk with them, those two feet, from where they are to where they can be.