**6 Easter**

**May 1, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

This morning I would like to offer some thoughts about the man at the Pool of Beth-zatha. The story seems rather straight forward … There is a pool in northern Jerusalem where people gathered to be healed and Jesus visited the pool. He asked one of the men if he wants “to be made well.” The man doesn’t answer the question directly, but says that he has no one to put him in the water at the right time, to which Jesus says, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” That is the story … at least as we read it this morning. But like a lot of stories in John’s gospel there may be more to it than just the healing of a lame man.

The text tells us that the Pool of Bath-zatha … also called Bethsaida by some … is surrounded by five porticoes or porches. “In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed.” The Hebrew word for wind in “ruach,’ and it also means spirit and breath. These people that surrounded the pool at Beth-zatha would wait until the wind would stir the water … even a slight ripple would do … and they would go to the water believing it was the breath of God stirring the water, and that God’s spirit would heal them. This man that Jesus encountered had been coming to the pool for 38 years hoping to have someone put him in the water as the wind stirred it … but he was always too late.

Now, as most of you know, I have a son who was disabled in an auto accident over 30 years ago. He is paralyzed on his right side, he uses a wheelchair for mobility, and has comprehensive and expressive language issues. He is disabled. Some may refer to him as an invalid. However, I … personally … take offense to the term. Christopher is not “in-valid.” Yet in the time of Jesus those who were blind, and lame, and paralyzed were indeed marginalized and treated as if they were “in-valid” … unacceptable, worthless, of no value.

This particular man that Jesus encountered had been coming to the Pool of Beth-zatha for 38 years … that is a long time to be “in-valid” to the world around him. It put him in the company of dung collectors, hustlers and prostitutes. His livelihood would have been begging … totally dependent upon the sympathetic and benevolent generosity of others to put food in his mouth. There was nothing about him that would be a cause for validation … at least nothing that he could see.

So along comes Jesus, but this man does not know who Jesus is. Jesus asks him if he wants “to be made well.” The man avoids the question and whines about not being able to get into the pool in time. In response Jesus commands him to “Stand up, take you mat and walk.” Now the paralyzed or lame beggar is cured and can stand up and walk … but he is also out of a job. Not only that, but it is the Sabbath, and in the section immediately following our reading we hear that the Kosher police complained because the man who was healed was “working” on the Sabbath by carrying his mat. I guess the guy just can’t win. However, the fact is that he is no longer an “invalid” … he is now an acceptable and validated member of human society. He has chosen validation … and the responsibility that comes with it.

Do any of you remember the Monty Python movie “The Life of Brian?” For those of you who have never seen a Monty Python movie they are a strange form of humor … but they often make a point. “The Life of Brian” is about Brian Cohen who had the misfortune of having been born in Bethlehem on the same night Jesus was born, and Brian spent the rest of his life being confused with his better known neighbor.

One of the characters in “The Life of Brian” is a man roaming the backstreets of the old city of Jerusalem crying out, “Alms for an ex-leper. Alms for an ex-leper.” Brian asks, “Did you say ex-leper?”

That’s right, sir,” the man answers. “One day I was hopping along minding my own business. All of a sudden, he comes up. Cures me. One minute I’m a leper with a trade. Next minute, ‘You’re cured, mate.” Without so much as a by your leave. Bloody do-gooder.”

Brian, trying to be helpful, suggest that he go back to Jesus and tell him he wanted to be a leper again. “Guess I could do that,” the man said, “But I thought I would ask if I could just be a little lame in one leg instead.” That way he would have his “trade” back … being a beggar … but he wouldn’t have to be a leper.

There is a cynical side of me that sees the story from John’s gospel in somewhat the same light. Jesus asks the man at the Pool of Beth-zatha if he wants “to be made well.” The Greek words could be translated as “Are you willing to make the choice to be whole?” It isn’t just about curing this man’s paralysis or healing a lame leg. It is about being willing to take charge of one’s life and re-entering the world as a responsible individual. It is about validation. The cynical side of me says that Jesus wasn’t acting out of sympathy for this man who had been lying by this pool for 38 years. Rather, Jesus was demanding that the man move out of his cycle dependency upon others, take responsibility for his own life, and get on with it. It is a choice. You can be an invalid with your whole being dependent upon others. Or you can accept validation and the responsibility that comes with it. You can be “made well.” You can be whole.

I don’t think it is a stretch to say that many of us know the conundrum of the dependency cycle. When is providing help for a spouse, or sibling, or child, or friend a matter of fostering dependency … and when is it functional help? When do we become co-dependent in the relationship because we fear we might lose the other’s love if we don’t continue to provide the support they ask for? How do we invalidate another by passively condoning their dependency? And … probably the most difficult question of all … how do we get out of the co-dependent/dependent cycle once we are in it? I wish I had the answer. I’ve known it in my life … children, siblings, cousins, friends.

Some of you know that Caren and I, as part of our ministry, have provided consulting to congregations in conflict … highly anxious congregations. There were lots of projections upon us that we would have the answers to their problems. In reality we were the non-anxious presence in the midst of a highly anxious emotional system. Our role was to be non-anxious in the midst of their anxiety, and in the process bring some calm to the troubled waters. Churches … at least congregations … are susceptible to dependency/co-dependency relationships and the unfulfilled expectations that lead to conflict. When the people do not feel validated they become anxious. Much of what Caren and I did when working with a congregation over a six-month period was to ask the question, “Do you want to be made well?” And to those who were emotionally and spiritually mature it then became our role to show them that they could stand up, and pick up their mats, and walk.

Jesus saw this man in the portico of the Pool at Beth-zatha. He had been there for 38 years as an invalid … as an in-valid person dependent upon others who never met his expectations. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be made well … to become whole … to live with self-validation. The man was confused, and responded that he still needed help. Jesus just pointed to the reality … you can live the rest of your life as an invalid asking people to take you to the pool, but it hasn’t worked for 38 years why do you think it will work in the future? Rather, you can stand up now, take your mat, and get on with your life. You are a beloved and blessed child of God made worthy because you are made in God’s image. That is the validation that God gave you. It will make you whole. It will also come with a cost … but it is worth the price.

That is the choice for you and for me. Whatever it is in our lives that keeps us as an invalid … our dependency upon an addiction, a relationship, a way of seeing ourselves, our fear of letting another down … or the fear that we won’t be loved if, in their eyes, we have let them down … if that dependency keeps us from the self-validation that is ours for the asking then we are no better than the man in the portico at the Pool of Beth-zatha. The question is, “Do you want to be made well?” Do you want to be whole? Are you willing to accept the validation that you are a beloved and blessed child of God made in God’s image? Then take up your mat and walk.

Amen.