

Being Made Well

6th Sunday of Easter, Year C – John 5:1-9

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 1, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Just to the north of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, in what is now the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, is an archeological site that most scholars believe was once the Pool of the House of Mercy, Bethesda of this morning's lesson from John's Gospel. For centuries, scholars looked for signs of this pool among the rubble of the many times that Jerusalem had been destroyed and rebuilt, and most settled on one of the small *mikvahs*, ritual cleansing pools near the entrance to the ancient Temple, as the remnants of the Pool of Bethesda, though none of them really fit the description here. Then in the closing years of the nineteenth century, archeologists uncovered the mammoth pool complex, just inside what is *now* called the Lion's Gate.

There were five porticos at Bethesda, roofed colonnades to shelter from the elements those that came there for healing, those that came for mercy, those that came... because they had no place else to go.

There was a time when Simeon had been a healthy young man, full of potential and promise, full of *life*. He had grown up in the village of his mother's people, working with his father and brothers and cousins in the fields where generations of their family had called home. Then one day, the line of the plow had broken, the ox had lurched forward, and the plow-head had kicked back onto Simeon's leg and side. His people had immediately run to his aid, and had somehow stopped the flow of blood. Through some miracle, Simeon had survived the next few terrifying hours and days of pain, he had somehow survived the *weeks* of fever and delirium of infection. His family closed in around him and did what they could to help, but as weeks turned into months and then into years, *everyone* knew that Simeon's days of being a contributing member of the family were over. And so he had gathered what was his, he had left the only home he had ever known, and he had come to the great city, to eke out what existence he could. He had come to the porticos of the House of Mercy, hoping for something, *anything* that would return his life to something *like* what it had been before that terrible day.

By contrast, Joses had never seen a day of health in his life. In point of fact, Joses had never *seen* anything, but had been blind from the day of his birth. From his youngest days, he remembered hearing the talk when people assumed he wasn't paying attention, the talk when it was as if he wasn't there, talk about whose fault it was that poor Joses had been born blind, who had sinned that their punishment was poor little blind Joses. In the tight, crowded apartments of the city, most people that he knew were kind enough, and as he grew up Joses had been provided for, first by his family, and then out of the goodness of people's charity. But not wanting to be any more of a burden than he already was, he had eventually moved to a different part of the city and taken up life among the beggars that sat at the wide steps up to the Temple Mount. There he would sit for hour upon hour, stretching out his little wooden bowl, so the pilgrims coming to the Temple wouldn't have to risk becoming unclean by placing some coin directly into the hands of a sinner. There Joses would sit, in the scorching sun, or in the pouring rain, until sometimes, *sometimes*, he would retreat to the shelter of the porticos of the House of Mercy, just for a moment's rest.

Jonathan could not remember quite *how* it all began. Every now and then, in the spring or fall when the sun was not too hot and the wind did not blow cold through the colonnade, Jonathan could just remember his life as a boy and as a young man, his life when he ran with his siblings and with his friends in their hometown to the north. But mostly Jonathan's world was the small mat on which he spent his days *and* his nights near the edge of the Pool of Bethesda. It had started with a pain in the ankle and then the knee of his left leg that made him limp, but only some of the time. By the time he had begun to have trouble with his *right* leg, his left was nearly useless, and he got around, *barely*, leaning on his crutch. Now, still not an old man by any means, Jonathan's legs were useless to him altogether, contorted and painful from whatever disease had taken them from him, and withered and wasted from years of disuse. So Jonathan stayed as close to the pool as he could. And when the others clamored, or when the authorities pushed, he dragged himself and his mat into the back corner of his portico where he wouldn't be in anyone's way, where he would be out of sight and out of mind in the House of Mercy.

We don't know how many of these sick and blind and lame and withered waited and watched in the five porticos of the House of Mercy. We don't know how many of these Jesus passed by the Sabbath of today's portion of the story. Scripture does not name the man in this story, so I won't. But we do know that this man had been there a long time, perhaps for much of his life, perhaps begging mercy, *and* a living, from those better off than he, perhaps just taking whatever ease he could from the relative shelter of the porticos. Jesus stopped to interact with this one man out of the many, and asked him what I've always thought to be a curious question. There in the middle of a throng of those in need, Jesus asked the man, "Do *you* want to be made well?" "Do you *want* to be returned to wholeness?"

Here on this side of the Resurrection, we come to this House of Mercy, this Bethesda looking for pretty much the same thing, don't we? Some of us come because we have been wounded, injured by our own willful turning aside or careless neglect, or hurt by the hatefulness or insensitivity of others. Some of us come because we know that something, something is lacking in our lives, even if we can't quite see what it is. Some of us come because things have just slid down some slippery slope to a place where we are just plain sick and tired of being sick and tired.

We come to this House of Mercy, not because we see here a perfect collection of perfect people, but looking for a place of healing for those that are as broken and blind and bent as we are. We come beneath this sheltering colonnade, this portico of protection, looking for some sign that we are not alone on our journey, some glimpse of hope for the days and months and years to come, some assurance of mercy beyond what we truly know we deserve.

And here we find Jesus. Or, more importantly, here, *here* Jesus finds *us*. Jesus finds all of us huddled here in this shelter for saints *and* sinners *and* cynics. And, more importantly, Jesus finds *you*, and Jesus finds *you*, and Jesus finds *you*, and Jesus finds... me. Jesus finds *each* of us here with a different need, each of us here with our unique burden, each of us here with our own brokenness. Jesus finds each of us here, among the throng of seekers after mercy, and he asks each of us, "Do *you* want to be made well?" "Do you *want* to be made whole?"

It's still a curious question, perhaps. And I suspect the answer each of us gives is just as complicated as the journey that has brought us this far. But as Jesus finds *each* of us here, as Jesus *meets* each of us here, as Jesus *knows* each of us here in this House of Mercy, his answer is always the same: "It's time, to take up your mat... and walk."

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*