

C Easter 6  
 2013 May 5  
 John 5:1-18  
 "Dear Diary"

A man walks into a doctor's office. He has a stalk of asparagus stuck up his nose, a carrot in his left ear and a floret of broccoli in his right ear. "What's the matter with me?" he asks the doctor. The doctor replies, "You're not eating properly."

I have given some thought to this man by the well over the past week. We are told that he had been ill for 38 years. We are not told exactly what is wrong with him, but we know from verse 8 that he had a mat, and that after being healed he picked it up and walked. Matthew, Mark and Luke has a similar story in which the man is paralyzed. Thus it seems pretty clear that the man's affliction, as we find it in John's gospel, prevents him from walking. Until he meets Jesus.

In a flight of fancy I have wondered what this man might have written each day as he lay close to the pool, writing in a daily diary. Yes, I realize that people almost certainly didn't keep diaries in those days, and it is entirely possible that this man couldn't read or write, anyway. But suppose he did keep a diary.

I suspect each day's entry would read something like this. "Dear diary. Today Benjamin and Joseph took me down to the pool. They laid me in my usual place. There were a lot of people at the pool today. The water was disturbed twelve times today, and people rushed down to the water each time, but I didn't see any miraculous healings. Of course, although I tried so diligently each time, I could not fight my way through the crowd in time to make it to the water. So nothing happened. Benjamin and Joseph came in the evening and took me home."

And the next day would read about the same: "Dear diary. Today Benjamin and Joseph took me down to the pool. They laid me in my usual place." If we assume that the affliction struck this man in his adulthood, he would have written more or less the same thing every day for 38 years. That would be 13,870 days that this unnamed man would have written pretty much the same thing in his diary. Almost 14,000 nearly identical diary entries.

Couldn't make it to the water when it was disturbed. Was taken home, just as I came. Unable to walk. We don't know that the man was laid by the pool for all of those 38 years, but if he was, wow: what amazing fortitude and dedication. He would have had a great deal of faith in the healing capacity of those waters.

The best ancient manuscripts that we have do not attempt to explain what the disturbance of the water is all about. Some less reliable ones mention the water being disturbed by angels, but biblical scholarship has revealed that that explanation was added by later scribes in order to give an explanation for the water being "stirred up." In fact, it appears that John did not intend to relay a cause for the water's disturbance. The water was simply disturbed from time to time, and when it was, the water was supposed to have miraculous healing powers.

You can visit the ruins of the Pool of Bethzatha today. By the way, you may have heard the name pronounced Bethesda. Both pronunciations of them are reasonable renditions of the name. Anyway, the location of the Pool is very well identified, and archaeologists continue to work there. The archaeological evidence indicates that there were actually two pools there, but perhaps the second one was constructed after John's report of this incident. We also know

from later secular sources that the apparent healing properties of the waters were known to the Romans and that they would come from distant places to seek that healing.

During the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt he and his staff were looking for a place to locate what has become the National Institutes of Health. One day he happened to be driving through the little town of Bethesda, Maryland, northwest of Washington, DC, and one of his advisors reminded him of the name of the town. Roosevelt told his advisor, that Bethesda would be the place where the NIH would be headquartered.

If we look at the overall arch of the story we are told here in chapter 5, we will recognize some remarkable parallels between another story which is told in chapter 9 of John's gospel. In chapter 9 Jesus heals a man who has been blind from birth, and that event also takes place on the sabbath of the Jews, which is of course the Saturday of each week. And in chapter 9 as well, Jesus receives grief from the Jerusalem religious authorities. In fact, throughout John's gospel, you find Jesus having run-ins with the authorities. Even here in chapter 5, early in the gospel, they are looking for an excuse to have him executed.

Anyway, the similarities between the accounts of Jesus healing the man who cannot walk in chapter 5 and the man who cannot see in chapter 9 are very striking. Both healings serve as the catalyst for Jesus to announce to his antagonists who he is, and why he has been sent. When Jesus does this, however, in both cases the antagonists simply become more enraged. They do not want to hear it, especially when he speaks of God as being his Father. In their minds, he is then making himself equal to God, and that, to them, is blasphemy. Note that in John's gospel, healing stories are very often tied to an explanation by Jesus himself, of who he is, and why he was sent.

Jesus happens to be in the vicinity of the pool when he notices this man, and apparently knows that he had lain close to the pool for a long time. He asks him a most remarkable question. "Do you want to be made well?" What a silly question! Of course he wants to be made well! He has come to the healing waters for many years, perhaps all 38 of them. He struggles to get down to the pool whenever the surface of the pool is disturbed, but has not been able to get there in time. We might try to imagine his desperation and depression, but we probably cannot. Of course he wants to be made well!

Jesus, however, may be asking a different question. "Do you want to be made well?" Perhaps there is more to this man's illness than his physical health. Perhaps his reliance on the healing powers of the pool, a kind of idolatry, is his real illness. Or perhaps there is some other kind of brokenness that Jesus detects. Maybe Jesus wants to heal the entire man, not just his physical infirmity. That would correspond with his words to the man sometime later when he encounters him walking in the temple: "See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you."

Be aware that Jesus does not attribute all illness to sin, and especially not so in John's gospel. In the parallel story in chapter 9, in which Jesus heals the blind man, his disciples ask him whether the blind man or his parents sinned, so that God has punished him in return. Jesus replies to them: Neither one. He has been afflicted in this way, Jesus says, "so that the works of God might be revealed in him." In other words, so that God's compassion and healing power can be revealed through the healing Jesus is about to perform.

Jesus asks the man, "Do you want to be made well?" Could it be, that at least for some of us, what we think is wrong with us is not what's really wrong with us? Could it be, that for some of

us, we are not really aware of the depth of our brokenness, or that we attribute our difficulties to a problem which is visible, but not the real cause of those difficulties? Could it be, that for some of us, we are seeking remediation of a problem which is not the real problem?

The story of the man at the pool reminds us that Jesus wants us, too, to be made well, inside and out? He asks us, too: Do you want to be made well? We have to be somewhat careful in answering that question, because it is apparent that he would like to make us entirely well: emotionally, spiritually, mentally, physically. Do we really want to be made 100% well, or could it be that we have grown comfortable with some of our afflictions, and would rather continue living with them?

The man's response to Jesus: '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.' The man is still looking to the waters to heal him, when the one who can heal him is standing right there in front of him.

Note that the man does not ask Jesus for healing. In fact, it doesn't seem the man has any idea who Jesus is. There is no demonstration of faith required for this miracle. The man does not have to profess faith in any way. The miracle, what John calls a sign, happens. He is healed, perhaps even more than physically. Jesus says to him, "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." At once, we read, he is made well, and he picks up his mat, and begins to walk.

"Dear diary. Today Benjamin and Joseph took me down to the pool. They laid me in my usual place. There were a lot of people at the pool today. I was waiting for the water to be disturbed. A man came to me and asked me if I wanted to be made well! What a ridiculous question! I looked at him as though he was crazy. Finally I explained to him why I was there, and how the healing waters worked. He told me to stand up and walk.

Dear diary: I did. After 38 years, I stood up, picked up my mat, and began to walk. I can walk! I found out a little later that the man is named Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee. The Pharisees are really irritated that this man healed me on the sabbath day.

But I certainly don't care. Dear diary: I have been healed. I can walk! I can work. I can now care for myself. Maybe I can now find a wife, perhaps even children. And somehow, I sense that I have been made well in other ways, beyond simply having my legs made strong. What could that be all about?

Dear diary: Who is this Jesus, anyway?