

“Silly Questions?” GPPC 5-26-19
Psalm 67, John 5:1-9

[Read before the gospel reading.] If you have a pew Bible handy, I invite you to turn to John 5:1-9 (page 96 in the pew Bible). Take a close look at verse 4. Did you find it? No? It's not there, right? As you may know, the Bible did not drop down out of heaven in finished form one day. Instead, the Bible began as stories that were told, an oral tradition that was gradually written down, edited, eventually coming into a more or less final form. How was the early Bible reproduced? Not with photocopy machines but by human hands, by scribes. And as the copying took place over the centuries sometimes the scribes might add a little bit of clarification to the text before them. And that's what happened with verse four. It's found in some ancient manuscripts, but not the oldest and most trusted ones. It reads “for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.” So you know why verse four is

Jeff Paschal

missing, and as we read, you might see why a scribe might add it in for clarification. [Prayer and then read John 5:1-9]

In addition to my recreational studies of 18th century Russian literature, quantum physics, and nuclear engineering, I have also sometimes watched comedians of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour. Anybody else willing to admit you've watched it? (I thought as much!) One of those Blue Collar comedians is a guy named Bill Engvall. He notices that we human beings are prone to asking foolish questions. And Engvall thinks when we ask those questions we should be given a sarcastic answer and issued a sign to hold that reads, "I'm silly" (actually something a little worse, but there are little ones here). I'm not sure Jesus would approve of this, but let's try a few.

So Engvall was out driving his truck and got a flat tire. He pulled into a service station. The attendant came out, looked at the tire and asked, "Tire go flat?" Engvall said, "Nope. No, I was driving and those other three just swelled up on me." And the man said, "The heat will do that." Here's your sign.

Jeff Paschal

Engvall went fishing with a buddy. At the end of the day, he and his friend pulled their boat up to the dock. A man on the dock saw their stringer laden with bass. He asked, “Y’all catch all those fish?” “Nope,” said Engvall. “Talked ‘em into giving up.” Here’s your sign.

Finally, he says he once stood beside a trucker who’d gotten his truck stuck under an overpass. The responding police officer pulled up and said, ‘Hey, you get your truck stuck?’ The trucker said, ‘No sir, I was delivering the overpass and I ran out of gas.’ Here’s your sign.

You get the idea. Even the smartest of us occasionally ask silly questions, right?

Is that what happened with Jesus, or was it something else?

John says there was some sort of Jewish festival going on. We don’t know which one. But at any rate, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And when he got there he visited this large pool. One Bible scholar says, “The pool was, in ancient times, a kind of spa, where healings were thought to take place.” (D. Moody Smith in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, 1054.) And in their explorations, archaeologists have actually found this particular pool in Jerusalem. It was called Beth-zatha which might be translated as

Jeff Paschal

“house of olives.” There were five sections and five porticoes. And in these sections lay people who were dealing with terrible afflictions. Some were blind, others lame, and others paralyzed (the Greek word for paralyzed actually means “dried up, withered”).

John says Jesus went to Beth-zatha, and he saw a man lying there. The man had been ill for thirty-eight years. And there’s a lot about this man that we don’t know. We don’t know if he got sick when he was a child. We don’t know what exactly afflicted him. We don’t know how he got down to the pool. We don’t know if someone had been bringing him down to the pool for thirty-eight years, or if he crawled down there each day. There’s quite a bit that we don’t know.

But we know that Jesus saw the man and that somehow Jesus knew he had been there a long time. And we know Jesus asked the man a question, just one question. “Do you want to be made well?”

Doesn’t this seem like a silly question to ask?

The man had been there at the pool for a long time. And he had been ill for thirty-eight years. Of *course*, he wanted to be made well. Of course! What a ridiculous, insulting question for Jesus to ask!

Jeff Paschal

Or was it?

Let's think about our own lives for a moment. Do we have some destructive habits and sins that we repeat day after day, week after week, year after year? Fruitless worry? Cynicism? How about apathy? Or out of control anger? The refusal to forgive others or to accept God's forgiveness? Lust instead of love? Laziness? The failure to take seriously and to work with God in nurturing our spiritual life?

Let's take a look in the mirror. Or look deep inside. What is it that leaves us spiritually dried up, withered, and paralyzed? Do we want to be made well?

And what if we looked at our congregation? It's a wonderful church, full of caring people who love each other and who love the world God has placed into our stewardship. But, if we are honest, we also know we need to be made well. Too much focus on making ourselves feel good, and not enough focus on making God feel good. Not enough patience when we disagree. Not enough commitment to show up for each other and to show up for God more consistently. Do we want to be made well?

And what if we looked at our country? It's a remarkable place with privileges and freedoms most of the world can only dream of. But are we in danger of allowing it to slip away as widespread corruption and misuse of power is tolerated at the highest levels of government? As the most aggressive policies are pursued. As we careen from one ill-advised war to another sacrificing the lives of others and the lives of our own people, and for what?

Do we want to be made well?

The sick man did not respond as if Jesus had asked him an absurd question. Instead, he said, "Sir, I don't have anybody to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and when I'm trying to get into the water, somebody else always gets in ahead of me."

Now as we discussed before the scripture reading the understanding of the time was that an angel would sometimes stir the water and whoever got into the water first after that would be healed. But as one Bible scholar says, "If the paralytic's malady were not so tragic, one could almost be amused by the man's unimaginative approach to the curative waters. His crotchety grumbling about the

Jeff Paschal

‘whippersnappers’ who outrace him to the water betrays a chronic inability to seize opportunity...” (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John, I-XII*, 209.)

Is that what we struggle with sometimes, a chronic inability to seize opportunity?

Well, Jesus was uninterested in whether the man’s excuse was valid or not. He just commanded the man, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” And so he did. And the only contribution the man made to the whole process was his willingness to do what Jesus commanded, to claim his healing by actually getting up and living as someone who had been healed.

It’s a good reminder, isn’t it? We all need to be made well in some way or another. And we all tend to make excuses, valid or not. But the man’s question is ours too. Do we want to be made well? Or would we prefer to stay in familiar misery? Do we want to be made well?

Is there something in your life or my life that is broken, some paralysis of spirit, some dried up withered attitude that needs new life? Jesus has this strange and surprising way of asking, “Do you want to be

Jeff Paschal

made well?” And if we say yes, then we’re stuck having to live into that healing.

Do we want to be made well? That’s not silly question at all. Is it?

[If you’re willing, I invite you to close your eyes for a moment.

Breathe slowly and deeply. Slowly and deeply. And as you breathe in, imagine breathing in the Spirit of God, the love of God. And as you breathe out, imagine breathing out, letting go of that which troubles you, that which withers you, paralyzes you, harms you. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply for a few moments. Imagine Jesus coming to grant wholeness to you. Imagine letting go and trusting. Imagine taking up your mat and walking. Continue to breathe. Slowly and deeply. And trust yourself to God’s amazing love, God’s light. In Christ our Lord. Amen.]