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The National Presbyterian Church

## The Man at the Bethesda Pool

John 5

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Today, I have a great text for you. It's the fifth chapter of John's Gospel. This is a wonderful text where once again Jesus meets someone and it turns out to be an unforgettable encounter.

John 5:11, "After this, there was a feast of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." This is the second visit of our Lord in Jerusalem. John is very interested in these sort of details. This is probably the Pentecost Feast because a little later our Lord will be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles which will be in the fall, so this is the second visit to Jerusalem. There is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate, a pool in Hebrew called Bethesda. We know that name very well here in Washington, D.C. we have a city and a Naval hospital named after this pool. John describes the pool which had five porches, in which lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame and paralyzed. Certain ancient manuscripts actually explain that there was a tradition about that pool and that text reads, "For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, troubled the water, and whoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatever disease he had." That sentence does not appear in all of the manuscripts but does appear in several, which explains the tradition of that pool. John is interested in these sorts of details. In fact, if you go to Jerusalem today, archeologists have been able to discover the Sheep's Gate pool with the five porches intact still and they're actually in the foundation area of a building that has been built above the pool.

When Rudolf Bultmann wrote his commentary on John's Gospel, since

the Dead Sea Scrolls had not yet been discovered and no one knew where that name came from, therefore he posits the theory that, the gospel writer obviously writing much later created the name Bethesda. Maybe they knew that the Bethesda Naval Hospital would be called after this and therefore they made up that name. Then the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, which date at 100 B.C., one of the Dead Sea Scrolls is the Copper Scroll. And in the Copper Scroll which is mainly geographical details, mentions Sheep Gate pool as Bethesda Pool. So, John knows. He's interested in just those kinds of details. He's interested in the porches. He's interested in the tradition of the troubling of the water in that pool. And notice, one more thing he's interested in, one man was there who had been ill for 38 years. John notices that detail as well about this man. So, let's watch this text unfold.

“One man been ill for 38 years, and when Jesus saw him and knew that he had been lying there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” And the sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled. And while I'm going, another steps down in front of me.” That's an intriguing dialogue because Jesus asks, a simple question, “Do you want to be healed?” The man does not really answer or hear that question. You know, sometimes we get to a point in our life where we don't hear a new unexpected question. He hears another question. He answers a different question. It seems to me, anyway. He's answering the question, “Why are you still here?” After all, Jesus was there with his disciples. Maybe he looks like a committee, perhaps a research group for an ecology task force.

When I was in Berkeley, the University of California School of Sociology sent a group of sociologists out to interview the people that were on the streets of Berkeley, and a lot of them were nomadic people many of whom were homeless. The students published their interviews of these people. I was intrigued by the title of the document that the School of Sociology, University of California published from those interviews. They titled it, “Down and Out in Berkeley.” It's not exactly a document that the Chamber of Commerce would want to use as a tourist track “Down and Out in Berkeley.” And maybe Jesus there with his disciples, looks like a group of sociology students with their professor or maybe they're even worse. Maybe they're from the Park Department, and the man hears them saying, “Why are you still here? We're trying to clean this pool up. We're expecting tourists and we would like to get some of you guys out of here.” And so perhaps, that may be the question this man answers. He is so discouraged he can't

hear a new question. "Do you want to be healed?" All you have to say is 'Yes' or 'No.' He says, "Well, every time the water is troubled, somebody gets in front of me. Nobody helps me to get into the pool." That's what he answers.

Jesus is amazing in this encounter because he breaks through that barrier. He breaks through the discouragement on the part of this man and now we are in for a big surprise. "Do you want to be healed?" The sick man answered, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the water when the pool is troubled. And while I'm going down, somebody goes ahead of me." And Jesus said to him, "Get up, take your mat, and walk around." And that's exactly what happened. At once, the man was healed and he took up his pallet and he walked around. But then the plot thickens.

Now that day was the Sabbath so the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath. It's not lawful for you to carry your pallet." There's an irony here. He's never been guilty of that problem before. And his health, his newfound health has invited him into a new dilemma. He's carrying his pallet, Jesus told him to. He's carrying it on the Sabbath day. And that's work so he's not supposed to do that. So he answered those folks that raised the question, "The man who healed me said to me, 'Take up your pallet and walk.'" And they asked him, "Well, who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your pallet and walk?'" And now the man who had been healed did not know who it was for Jesus had withdrawn as there was a crowd in that place." I am fascinated by this incident because Jesus acted and this man didn't even know who Jesus was. He didn't say, "Oh, Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me." He didn't say that. He didn't even know who Jesus was. It was Jesus who saw him. He didn't see Jesus. And our Lord said, "Get up." It's an amazing breakthrough.

And afterward, Jesus found him in the temple. Notice in this text, there are two findings that occur. The first finding, when Jesus finds the man who can't even hear a new question and only answers a question he's probably answered over and over again, when people say, "Why are you still here?" Jesus enabled him to get up. And now he finds him a second time. He finds him in the temple and said to him, "Look, you're well now. Sin no more. Lest something worse befall you."

It's interesting. First, he heals him physically and now he heals him morally, spiritually, and calls him to the way of righteousness. He says, "Look, you're

well now. Don't sin anymore. Follow the way of righteousness." That's the call to discipleship. Walk in the way of righteousness.

Have you ever noticed that our Lord does this in other healings as well? There was an amazing incident that occurs in the eighth chapter of John where a woman was caught in the act of adultery and was thrown at Jesus' feet and a part of the crowd said, "You know, the Leviticus code said she should be stoned. What do you say?" And, of course, they're trying to entrap Jesus because under Roman law, it would be illegal for Jesus to authorize a stoning. And so it's an impossible answer that he can give. Instead, he stoops down, writes in the sand, the woman is there, and then he says, "The one without sin, let him cast the first stone." But he doesn't move, so if they will stone her, they're going to stone very accurately because he's still there. He doesn't move and then, finally they leave. They leave from the oldest to the youngest, but they leave and he's left with the woman all by herself and then he says to the woman, "Woman, where are your accusers?" And she says, "They've left." And then this wonderful sentence from Jesus, "Neither do I accuse you. Go and sin no more." He calls her to the way of righteousness. She discovers grace and truth together.

Another incident occurs in Luke's Gospel, the fifth chapter, where there are four men who have a friend who's paralyzed, and they're trying to bring that man to Jesus because the reputation of our Lord as a healer has already spread in Capernaum. And this takes place in the town of Capernaum near the lake of Galilee, but they cannot get into the room of the house where Jesus is teaching. A very wealthy man must own this house because it features a tiled roof. The four friends cannot get in but they're pretty industrious. So these four men with their friend take the man on a stretcher to the roof and they start peeling away the tiles. This has got to be one of the funniest scenes in the New Testament, perhaps not for the owner of the house who began to notice little pieces of dust falling and then a little streak of light and wonders about what his honored guest will do. "Is Jesus still lecturing?" He doesn't stop his meeting. Finally, the hole gets bigger and bigger and a kind of first century elevator appears and they lower this man. That's what the text says. Luke is very detailed. They lower him right in front of Jesus, and our Lord then stops teaching, looks at this young man on the bed and says—this is really quite humorous when you think about it—he says to the young man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And I can see the four friends up in the roof saying, "What did he say? What did he say? His sins are forgiven? That's very nice. He could have shouted that out the door. That's not why we brought him. We brought him to have his legs healed!" But our Lord said, "Your sins are forgiven," and then this wonderful next sentence,

“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins, I say to you,” and then he spoke to this young man on the stretcher, “Get up, take your bed, and leave.” Notice, two things happened in each of these three incidents. The person is related to physically and also related to spiritually and morally. In each instance these three are called to the way of discipleship. This man at the Pool of Bethesda is healed physically and then our Lord finds him in the temple and says, “Look, you’re well now. Sin no more, unless something worse happen. Follow the way of righteousness.” I love this text. But it’s not over; there is still one more part of the text.

So after Jesus did this and said that to the man, afterward the man then went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who healed him. Notice, he has new responsibilities now. He bears witness. And he goes to the leaders that had challenged him and he said, “I found out the man who did it. It’s Jesus who told me to carry my pallet around.” And then John notes, “And this was why the Jews persecuted Jesus because he did this on the Sabbath.” But Jesus answered them, “My father is working still and I am working. Notice on the day of rest, on the Sabbath day, I’m working,” he says. And this is why the Jews sought all the more to kill him because he not only broke the Sabbath but he also called God His father and made himself equal with God. This concludes John’s narrative of this man at the Pool of Bethesda.

I want to ask the question, what is the significance of this text for us today? Why should we read this text? And why has John put this narrative into the Gospel of John? I can think of two reasons that makes this text really important. First, what we learn about ourselves and our own discipleship through the man at the Pool of Bethesda. And secondly, what we learn about Jesus. First, what do we learn about ourselves? We learn that sometimes when we can’t even say what we should say or know what we should know. Jesus still knows how to find us and to heal us. We need to hear that. At the pool, our Lord physically found this man and he physically healed him. And the man didn’t even know who Jesus was. Many times when we look back on our life, we realize things happen to us that we didn’t understand at all at the time, and this is a great text for that. We experience love and grace sometimes from people who, love us. Or mysteriously, we experience grace that breaks through in our life and we are not even aware of it happening until we look back on it. This is what happens in this incident, this amazing breakthrough, there is a shock of grace that occurs. It’s physical. It happens at the pool. And then, later Jesus treats his man as a whole person not just a physical person. He finds him in the temple and then calls him to the way of righteousness with his whole life. So we discover that we are not only physical though we are physical and the concreteness of our lives becomes a

very major part of what happens in this man as well as in our lives too. He walks around and it's the walking around, carrying the pallet that causes the second half of this text to become so exciting. He carries responsibility. He takes on responsibility as he experiences God's grace.

I saw this week an interview on National Public Television about a group of youth in Pomona, California that created a DVD called "Is Anyone Listening?" about their experiences of poverty and experiences of the economic hardship that's going on right now. In that interview, the youth were asked, "Do you know the date when your families' mortgage is due?" And almost every kid raised their hands and it makes us wonder if 10 years ago, youth could be asked in a high school class, "Do you know when your parents' mortgage is due?" Very few kids would probably raise their hands. It is in this time of economic hardship when they would have to know that, but all of these kids knew when their parents' mortgage was due. As they were interviewed we saw that side of their hardship. But the beautiful part of that story is that these youth decided that, "We're going to do something about this." And they had a clothing drive of teenage clothes for teenagers that were in their crisis. They formed a coalition of youth in that school to try to figure out how to help one another in this time of economic hardship. So in a sense, it's a story of healing. It's a story of wholeness. I was glad it was on National Public Television.

This happens to the man at the Pool of Bethesda. He is physically healed, but then he is treated by Jesus as a whole man, he's given responsibility. He actually ends up witnessing to who Jesus Christ is. It gets Christ in trouble, but that's all right. It's a good kind of trouble. It enables that great dialogue that Christ has with the Pharisees over, "I am working. My Father is working." And so, it's an amazing obligation that this man takes on to himself. He takes on obligation. It's a little bit like deciding, "I'm going to reach out concretely even in hardship or in strong times. I'm going to signal that my life is in God's hands and I want to reach out and help others." And like these young people that decided in Pomona that they are going to reach out and help others, not just stand and wonder if anyone is listening, we're going to share what we're experiencing and do it with one another.

But best of all, at the Pool of Bethesda, we see how Jesus acts. We see dramatically his authority, his lordship, his sheer grace, just like we did with the woman caught in adultery, and with the man in Luke, the fifth chapter, who is lowered through the ceiling. We see that Jesus Christ has authority to act in favor of this one human being and he does it. And then when he's

challenged, he says, 'My Father is working and I am working, too.' Did you know that Philo, the Jewish philosopher of the first century, wrote that God does three kinds of work on the Sabbath Day because the question is, Does God rest on the Sabbath Day or does he work on the Sabbath Day? The Rabbinical Council at the end of the first century of the rabbis in Jerusalem agreed with Philo and actually agreed with Jesus. They decided that God does three works on the Sabbath. He gives life on the Sabbath because they knew that children were born on the Sabbath just like every other day and there's no harder work that any human being can do than a woman exerts in childbirth, and yet, God approves of that hard work. He gives life on the Sabbath. God judges on the Sabbath and God heals by His grace on the Sabbath. He does three works. That's what our Lord is saying. Shall I do work on the Sabbath in favor of this human being? He does. "I am working. My Father is working."

So Jesus is the one who breaks through barriers. He breaks through the barriers to find this man. He broke through a barrier to find a woman at the well. My colleague Eunice preached on that two weeks ago in chapter four of John. This woman at the well who had ancient anxieties and stresses between the Jews and Samaritans and Jesus broke through it. She noticed it. She says, "Why are you a Jew, talking to me, a Samaritan?" An old man named Nicodemus who is tied up at knots over his Phariseeism and Jesus breaks through to find him and says, "Nicodemus, you can be born again. You can have a whole new life." And that's good news. Nicodemus gets to hear it from Jesus. And it's breaking through a barrier; now this man at the Pool of Bethesda is entrapped by the worst barrier of all, total discouragement, 38 years ill, who knows how many years at the pool, never getting any help. And now, Jesus breaks through and gives him hope and then gives him a challenge, a work to do, a ministry to carry out.

One of the most respected of American poets, is Robert Frost, and of all his poems, my favorite would be "Mending Wall."<sup>1</sup> "Mending Wall" is a kind of a story poem that Robert Frost tells about his farm in Vermont. And he says, "In my farm there is a rock wall between my field and my neighbor's field. We're not growing anything. They're just orchards so we don't have animals out there but we still have a fence, a rock fence between his field and my field." And every spring, as the story unfolds in the poem, "We go out to see our field and we notice there's a hole in our fence big enough that two could pass abreast. We don't have sheep or anything in the field in so we don't care about that since we have orchards, but still we repair the fence every spring. He on his side, I on my side, we once again the repair the wall," and he says, "Because my friend always says good fences make good

neighbors. So we have to repair the fence.” And then Robert Frost in his poem says, “But I wonder, I wonder if that’s a good idea because I wonder if we are offending somebody or something by repairing the fence every spring. I wonder if we’re offending that something there is ....” This is one of the great lines of American poetry. “That something there is that doesn’t love a wall and that wants it down and makes a hole big enough that two can pass abreast.”

Now I don’t know whether Robert Frost is a Christian but that is a profoundly messianic line because he’s looking forward to the One who is able to break down the walls that separate us and “makes a hole big enough that two can pass abreast.” Jesus Christ is the One who does that. He does it at the Pool of Bethesda. He breaks a wall down. He does it at Jacob’s well with the woman at the well. He does it with Nicodemus. He does it over and over again, breaks down these walls. And finally on the cross, he will break down the worst of all walls. Sin, death and the power of evil will be destroyed. That worst of every wall will be broken down and He will reconcile us. We’re seeing a hint of it right here at the Pool of Bethesda.

Heavenly Father, thank you for these great texts. Thank you that you break down the walls, you know our names, and you know how to find us even when we’re not looking. We’re grateful for that Good News as well. So, Lord, bless us as we discover that grace that takes us by surprise. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen.

1 “Frost, Robert. “Mending Wall” p. 33. *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged* by Robert Frost, ed. by Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.

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