

John 5: 1-9
Questions on the Road to Hope
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If you spend much time with a preschooler you hear a lot of questions. Almost as soon as they learn to talk they start to ask questions. In the beginning every other sentence is “Why” Why do I have to hold your hand? Why do I need to wear a bike helmet? Why can’t I use a knife? Then they graduate to deeper questions. What happened to our pets when they die? Where is heaven? Who is God? From an early age they remind us that questions are the key to learning about life. Its always questions that lead us to wisdom.

A lot of people think the Bible is a book of answers. But the more I read these stories in scripture the more I see that it’s the questions that stand out. Here in the fifth chapter of John’s gospel we have a prime example. The story is set by one of the gates into the city of Jerusalem, a busy destination for travelers. There by the Sheep’s Gate, is a pool. It is not a fictional place; you can visit it today, as we did. (I have included a picture of Peggy standing with a French priest beside the pool.) The water still there but about 5 feet down from the surface now, is still spring-fed. When Jesus was alive people would gather in a portico next to the pool to wait for healing. Legend held that an angel would come when you least expected it to stir the water. Then the first person who could make it into those potent ripples would be cured of their afflictions. So, the portico filled up with people who were blind and lame, paralyzed or suffering from every kind of illness.

Jesus enters Jerusalem through the Sheep's Gate and approaches a man who has been sitting in that line for 38 years. This is where you have to ask the question. What? Is this an exaggeration? Who waits for 38 years for an angel to ripple some water? Is this guy extremely gullible? Is he even trying to be well? What's going on here? And why should we care? Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, Jesus says, If you want to be whole you need to get out of your own way. Jesus arrives at the Sheep's Gate and approaches a man whose been sitting there almost 4 decades. He doesn't wave his arms or call on Almighty God. He does not bow his head and give a big Messiah prayer. Instead, he asks the man "Do you want to be made well?" After all this time, I am starting to wonder. Do you really want this? How is it even possible that you could be here so long and yet still be waiting? What's getting in your way? Have you asked yourself? Is it you?

There are times in life when you cannot move forward because you are the issue, the problem. The story says that's the first thing you need to confront if you are facing a challenge that is hard to confront and you don't seem to be getting anywhere. Doing the same thing over and over expecting different results is the definition of insanity. To be successful, you first need to ask yourself am I getting in my own way.

Larry Bacow has just retired after a 5-year term as President of Harvard University. It was a short tenure that came at the end of a long career as a college president. First he served as president of Tufts and then he was president of MIT before he retired. But, five years ago when he was approached and asked to come

out of retirement and become president of Harvard he wasn't sure if he could do it. He knew it was a great honor and the capstone of his career. He had to know he had been very successful in his two presidencies. But the truth was he never saw himself at Harvard. He wanted to be called Larry, never Lawrence, and wondered if he was too down to earth. He says, "I literally looked in the mirror. I did not see the President of Harvard. I thought my hair wasn't gray enough. I thought my voice wasn't deep enough. I thought my presence was not serious enough. And if I'm really being honest, I thought I just wasn't tall enough." Then his wife of 47 years came into the room, and said, "Just be yourself and you'll be fine". Then he says, I actually stopped looking in the mirror and got out of my own way. As he led this prestigious institution for the last 5 years, during a pandemic, his honesty and openness proved exactly what they needed.

If you are hoping for a new job but never seem satisfied with your resume done maybe the problem isn't the job market. Maybe it's you. If you know it is time to move to a new place, but you can't seem to find the right house, maybe the problem isn't the real estate options; maybe it is you. If you dream of something new but never seem to take the steps in that new direction, maybe the problem isn't your situation. Maybe it isn't the people around you. Maybe it's you. Many of us live on that portico in Jerusalem. We can see the future. We imagine it. We rehearse it in our minds. We watch other people moving on. We may even envy them. Yet we remain devoted to a plan that's never going to work. Jesus says, sometimes you just need to get out of your own way.

Secondly, the story says it is easy to let our problems define us. When Jesus asks the man if he wants to be healed the man explains why he never has his miracle. “Every time I make my way into the water, someone else always steps in front of me.” This is where I wonder if Jesus doesn’t raise his voice in tough love to say. “Do you even want this healing? Or have you become accustomed to your misery. Have you made friends with these invalids? Have you put down roots here? Are you explaining to me why you can’t be healed because you’ve given up?”

Sometimes when we are stuck in life, we start to prefer the paralysis we know to the healing we don’t dare to hope for, the healing we worry we don’t deserve, the healing we’ve long ago given up on. Sometimes we pretend we want to move on, when in truth, we long ago adjusted to our misery. We’ve gotten used to these problems we complain about, and given up on trying to grab the brass ring or jump into the healing pool.

I hear a lot of church people who will tell you that churches are shrinking. They are closing at new rates. In 2019 4500 closed and only 3000 opened. Attendance at weekly worship has dropped and keeps plunging. People without church affiliation are now outnumbered those who worship. The church could use a miracle right about now, but I worry that many religious people have acclimated to this misery. No one seems to be asking how we could minister to the spiritual needs of our world today. I am not convinced that modern people have lost all interest in faith. Folks attend Soul cycle with a religious fervor. They send money to strangers on Facebook with missionary zeal. Huge numbers of people pray weekly.

They believe in spirituality if not religion. They have just grown tired of old-fashioned faith. Maybe, instead of sitting here paralyzed by the decline we see, we need to try to get out of our own way and build faith communities for today's audience.

Jesus is hard on this man in our story because he has not given up on him. He sees his potential and does not want him to be stuck.

Finally, Jesus says, Seize the day. Jesus believes in this man, so he tells him to forget the water cure. Forget the legend about the angel stirring the waters. Jesus says, don't wait a minute longer. Take your mat. Stand up and walk. Let's make this day the first one in the rest of your life. Jesus faith is contagious. The man does it. He gets up and walks.

There is a new movie out called "The Miracle Club" with Maggie Smith and Laura Linney. It takes place in Dublin in 1967 where a Roman Catholic priest organizes a trip to Lourdes, where people still bathe in the cold springs hoping for healing. It tells the story of five people who ignore all the bad advice of their families and decide to go. One wants a miracle for her son. One has cancer. One wants to heal her sense of guilt. One hopes to heal her relationship with her mom. Not everyone goes home with a physical faith healing. The miracles in this movie are born of subtle transformations. Instead, hearts open, anger is acknowledged, kindness re-kindled, relationship restored, and a little boy is changed.

It does not matter how many dead ends you have tried or how long you have been sitting at the edge of newness wondering if you can take the plunge. Whatever

wounds of body or soul define your days, the Bible says when you find the courage to get up and get out of your own way, throw off your cloak of self-pity or despair, and turn toward healing, you may be surprised at the power of that first step. Jesus doesn't want you languishing by pools of regret. Jesus isn't done with you yet. He says "Get up and move on."

Announcements

Welcome to worship at the Church of the Open Door. Welcome in person, and welcome online. Let's give a shout out to our online worshippers.

Welcome to the families who are here for the Sacrament of Baptism. We are so excited to welcome you and your children and extended families. It is a joy to share this sacrament together.

Welcome to you if you have blessings too numerous to name and want to thank God. Welcome if you are worried about someone you love. Welcome if you are feeling a close connection to God, or if you are finding your prayer path is pretty overgrown with weeds, and you are not sure about your faith. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey – welcome.

I am so glad to be back here with you. Peggy and I were at the Farmer's Market and some of you greeted us and you asked, Will you miss us? I want to answer that question for you. "Of course. I will miss your faces, your hugs, your children, your energy, your easy laughter when I make a joke." It has been such a wonderful year and I will undoubtedly miss you.

Don't forget Circle of Prayer on Wednesday. I will be leading it at 6 p.m. on the 2nd, as Mary Jo will be taking some well-deserved time off.

