

"A New Story" John 5:1-9
Church of the Good Shepherd
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The place was called Bethesda, the House of Mercy. But the man who had been beside the pool for 38 years couldn't tell you what mercy looked like. Mercy was supposed to be kindness shown to someone in a desperate situation. Perhaps some people had been kind to him, but he wasn't convinced that God was kind.

He stared at the ceiling of the stone porch day after day. It was the best view of least resistance from his thin pallet of blankets. And when he tired of staring at the ceiling, he would turn to face the water in the pool, staring so hard his eyes hurt. He stared until he hallucinated, imagining the fingers of the angel brushing the top of the water like a dragonfly.

When the angel finally came to trouble the waters, everyone got into the pool before he did. Of course they all believed the same thing: that the first one into waters troubled by an angel was the one healed. First come first served. They all believed that there was not enough mercy to go around. Mercy was a limited commodity. Grace was handed out sparingly.

"Do you want to be made well?" The stranger asked him. What kind of question was *that*? Hello! Of course he wanted to be made well. He had positioned himself beside the healing waters for a very long time. Was the stranger making fun of him? Judging him? Was he suggesting that the sick man was clinging to his illness on purpose? Jesus' question was salt in the man's wounds.

There was once a time when the sick man was full of hope. But over time his spirit was so broken, his disappointment in God so deep, his despair and hopelessness so profound, that he forgot what it was like to even hope anymore. "It's just the way I am," he told himself. "I'll never change. Change is not possible."

Do you want to change? "Do you want to be made well?" Jesus asks. But the man doesn't answer **that** question. He sidesteps the question that might have been answered with a simple "Yes," or "No." The man who had been ill for 38 years goes instead to a litany of blame and excuses for why he can't change.

"It's not my fault. It's just the way things are. No one will help me get into the pool when the angel troubles the waters. Everyone gets in ahead of me. And the rule is that the first one in is the one healed." The

man looks up at Jesus, feeling a little defensive. "You can't blame me," says the man is quick to blame everyone else for being stuck. He no longer can take responsibility for not being able to get out of his own way. His defensive response to Jesus reveals that he is mired in shame about who he is. His prickliness discloses that he feels his life is a failure.

I imagine Jesus squatting down beside the man so that he could look him in the eye. "Do you want to be made well," he asks again, gently, not criticizing, not blaming, not shaming, just curious. "Do you want to be made well," not assuming anything, but connecting with the man through a powerful question.

38 years is a long time to be stuck. Think of it, 38 years would be, what, 1978? 38 years is a long time to wander in the desert, trying to make your way to the Promised Land. 38 years is a long time to be the way you are, having lost hope that you can really change. 38 years is long enough to kill what little hope is left in you. The man beside the pool had been stuck with being who he was for a very long time. The story he had been telling himself for 38 years was that there was not enough mercy to go around.

"Well," Jesus said. "Why don't you just stand up?" Surely the man at least thought to himself: "Gee, why didn't I think of that." But he couldn't turn away from Jesus intense stare. What was it about Jesus' presence that gave the man a different sense of who he was? What was it about Jesus' presence that gave the man the capacity to act in a new way? What was it about Jesus' presence that helped him to stand up, to walk into his future a changed man? What is it about being in the presence of Jesus that changes us, heals us, and makes us whole?

Doug Silsbee writes about the power of presence to help people move into change. Silsbee says that when we seek to lead others or to help people grow, develop or change that the best gift we can offer is the mysterious reality of "presence."

Silsbee defines presence as "...a state of awareness, in the moment, characterized by the felt experience of timelessness, connectedness, and a larger truth." He writes that "presence engenders creativity, agility, resilience, and authenticity...when we are present, we are maximally resourceful and responsive to what our circumstances require of us."¹

Jesus' presence puts the man who had been ill forever in touch with the possibility of a new way of being in the world. Silsbee writes: "...presence is an invitation" that opens us up to joy and fulfillment. "Presence produces a feeling of waking up. Things come into sharper focus,

and we immediately experience more energy, alertness, and resourcefulness."²

The man beside the pool had become a prisoner of his own habit of thinking of himself only in terms of his lack. He was caught up in blame and closed to considering a reality other than what he already knew. The man beside the pool believed that mercy and grace were in short supply. His worldview was one of scarcity and lack. His theology was that God grudgingly handed out healing only one little miracle at a time. Jesus' presence declared otherwise. Jesus' presence interrupted the man's habits of brokenness, less than, lack. Jesus gave him a new story: a story of hope and abundance.

38 years is a long time to be stuck, to resist change, to hope for something better only to be disappointed. Jesus breaks through all of that. His presence invites the man to re-write the story of his life.

Do you ever feel that there is a part of you lying beside the pool of Bethesda? Are there places where you feel that you have been stuck forever? Are there aspects of yourself that you dismiss as ill formed or not worthy of mercy? Do you have moments of wanting to blame others for your stuckness? Welcome to Bethesda, it's where we live. But Bethesda is also the House of Mercy where God offers a presence which heals us.

And God calls us to go out into the world and be the presence that heals. We are to go to places where hope has been shattered and be the presence of mercy; we are to go into places of injustice and be the presence of righteousness.

We are invited to live in the House of Mercy, the place where the Impossible becomes Possible. We live in the House of Mercy, where there is enough grace to go around. We live in the House of Mercy where our stories of lack are traded in for stories of how the love of God changes everything. We live in the House of Mercy, where we are able to let go of the past and move into an abundant future. And we are called to be the merciful presence of Christ in the world. AMEN.

¹ Doug Silsbee. 2008. *Presence-Based Coaching: Cultivating Self-Generative Leaders Through Mind, Body, and Heart*. Jossey-Bass.

² Ibid.