

June 10, 2018 – 10:00 am Summer Worship

TEXT: John 5:1–13

TITLE: The Necessity of Making Waves

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Imagine you are trading in your old cellphone. When you hand it over, the store personnel completely wipes it clean—no more data, photos, apps, contacts, nothing. Now, imagine the same thing could happen to you as a person of faith—that somehow we could wipe you totally clean spiritually. You're a blank slate in terms of God and faith. Where would you start in order to build up your faith again? What's the first thing you should believe in order to become a believer?

That's not just an abstract question. In this day and age, lots of people have not been raised in church—or accompanied through the stages of faith by parents, friends, and Sunday school teachers. Lots of people come through our sanctuary doors and wonder in their hearts: What exactly do I believe in? Can I honestly say that my faith is strong? (Trust me, long-time members and first-time visitors ask this question of themselves, so don't feel bad if you are part of that group.) Our gospel lesson for today offers an answer to the question of “where do I begin if I want to have faith.” But it is in a surprising detail you might have overlooked.

Outside the walls of ancient Jerusalem, there was a pool surrounded by covered walkways, or porticoes. It's not clear in this passage what the pool was used for: Was it for washing? Did it collect rainwater that could be used for drinking or watering livestock? We don't know for sure. All that we're told is that around the pool were gathered lots of people in need of healing: blind, lame, and paralyzed. Included in that group was one man who'd been ill for 38 years. Given the life expectancy back then, that was assuredly most of his life. We're not told what's wrong with him. He mentions that he needs help to get into the pool quickly, because when he tries to do it by himself, he moves slower than everyone else. So for argument's sake, let's assume the man's legs are disabled in some way—that over the long years, they are fully atrophied and useless to him.

Now comes the first interesting detail of this story. The man mentioned that the waters in the pool were occasionally stirred up. Long ago, someone copying John's gospel by hand wanted to explain that detail—so he wrote in the margin of the manuscript “an angel of the Lord would stir up the waters in the pool, and whoever stepped in first after the stirring was made well from whatever disease afflicted them.” Later on, someone else saw that note in the margin and thought it was an omission from the original, so they copied it into the gospel narrative—so that over the centuries, it was accepted as part of John's original text. Only in the last hundred years have scholars determined it is not authentic to John's gospel and so they removed the verse from our bibles.

I confess that I sorta miss that verse, because it's a great image: people lying around a pool under the hot sun of ancient Palestine. Suddenly an angel stirs up the water, people scramble to jump into the pool, cannon-balling into the water, and one lucky

winner comes up from the waves shouting “I’m healed! I’m healed!” But it was right to remove that verse, because it is built on superstition, not true faith. God doesn’t work by magic and gimmicks. You don’t spin a wheel like on The Price is Right and try to win the Showcase Prize from God, or spend your life waiting for a golden ticket from the Lord like in Willy Wonka. Too much of today’s cultural Christianity treats God’s love and grace like a lottery ticket from the sky—given to some, withheld from others, seemingly without rhyme or reason.

Sadly it seems clear that the man by the pool of Beth-zatha believed this superstitious faith. And whatever ailed him only got worse over the years. His legs atrophied from disuse, as he lay there and waited and waited for 38 years. But you and I both know that the waves in pool weren’t the answer he needed. They weren’t part of the real faith that could make him well.

The man’s atrophied limbs are an excellent metaphor for much that ails us today—much that ails us as individuals, as a church, and as a nation. In many ways we feel paralyzed, helpless, as we lay at our spots by the pool we point to where the problem lies. I hear people say that all politicians are bad; that they’re corrupt and none of them can be trusted. But that’s just not true. I believe in our elected officials. I believe they are people who entered into public service out of a desire to help others, to make things better. That they are smart and capable, and though hamstrung by the pressures and politics of our time, they can serve us well. I hear some people say that the church is bad, especially those evangelicals out in red counties. But I believe every congregation contains people of good will who are imperfect and flawed, but who find ways to care for children, open their doors to strangers, comfort the grieving, and share what they have with the needy. I know it is trendy to bash the media, but I believe in reporters and newspapers, the people who work hard to tell the truth and shine light on the good and bad in our land so that we can be a better people. I know it is tempting to criticize businesses, but all over this nation there are companies large and small trying to protect jobs for their employees, who find ways to offer flex time to new mothers or give time off when there’s a death or tragedy in the workforce. The fact that offering praise to these institutions feels awkward only shows how much we have bought into this world’s negative mindset and are quick to cast blame and make excuses.

Are all these institutions perfect? No—just as none of us is perfect. But to cynically dismiss everything—government, church, media, business—is to give into our implicit biases about who’s at fault in our world. It is to cripple ourselves by allowing the very things we need to stand upon to atrophy and become useless appendages dangling beneath us.

Lots of things merit our faithful attention today. This past week alone I led a funeral for a non-member family whose daughter died of a drug overdose and I met with another family whose young adult child is battling a heroin addiction. The #MeToo movement reminds us how prevalent sexual violence against women still is in America. The recent Supreme Court ruling sadly fuels the flawed opinion that prejudice against gays and lesbians when masked as religious belief is somehow acceptable. What can we do? Or

more fundamentally, what can we believe—in whom can we have faith—as we seek to make our way together through the challenges of this day toward the promises of tomorrow?

By the pool of Beth-zatha, a man had given up. When asked if he wanted to be made well, the man only gave excuses for why things weren't better for him. So what did Jesus do? Jesus didn't put him in the pool. Jesus didn't feed the superstitious belief of a God who grants miracles like winning lottery tickets. Jesus didn't assign a disciple to be the man's friend—enabling the man to keep his atrophied legs by giving over the responsibility for healing to some “do-gooder” assigned to his case. Jesus didn't stir the waters of the pool. No, he stirred the waters of the man's spirit. He looked at him and saw him as a full person—a person of worth and value, despite what others believed of him. Jesus spoke to him directly and gave him three commands: Stand up. Take up your mat. And walk. With those words, the man was healed.

Don't try to analyze this miracle medically or too rationally, or you'll miss out how it applies to your own life. When Jesus said “Stand up,” the verb more typically means to “rouse yourself up,” to “awaken.” Jesus is telling the man to shake off his superstitious slumber, his despair and self-defeating cynicism. His first act is to wake up—to open his eyes—to snap out of it. Next, he tells him to take up his mat. In this life there will always be baggage we carry with us—parts of our past that are never past for us. That's what it means to be alive. But instead of lying on our mats, defining ourselves by our limits, we take them up, tuck them under our arms, and get moving. Which leads to the last command to walk. Walking is both a physical act and a moral act. You get from point A to point B by walking. You also get from darkness to light, from brokenness to healing, by walking as a person of compassion, integrity and faith.

And suddenly we're back to where we began. The question I asked at the start of this sermon was this: Where do we start if we want to have faith? Where do we begin? Tucked in this wonderful bible story, it says in vs. 6 that when Jesus saw the man lying there, he knew that he had been there a long time. How is that possible? We can't assume Jesus had met him before or knew him from other visits to Jerusalem. But scripture tells us that before we come to know Jesus, we are already known. We are known by God, the artist creating all life. We are known by Jesus, the redeemer of infinite love. We are held by the Holy Spirit that inspires and corrects and guides us each day. Faith doesn't begin with us. Faith begins with our accepting that we are known. That Jesus knows us. That he has always known us.

Think about that for a moment—as if it were the first bit of faith written on the blank slate of your soul. If God knows you, you are not now nor ever have been alone. You are not now nor ever have been without resources—without a real connection to that which is the foundation of life, the source of love, justice and hope. The invalid by the pool didn't know who Jesus was at all—but Jesus knew him. Jesus came to him, looked him in the eyes, told him to awaken, to stand up, carry his baggage, and start walking forward—and that's what he did.

Faith begins with the one who has faith in us, who necessarily stirs the waters in us, who knows our prayers before a word is on our lips or thought is in our minds. Start there. And see what joy, what faith, what true and abundant life will follow.

AMEN