

July 26, 2020
Nineteenth Sunday of Online Worship

Rev. Jacob Snowden

Groan and Shout

Matthew 13: 33, 44-52

John 5: 2-13

Our second reading is from the book of John, chapter 5 verses 2 through 13:



Vindecarea Stabanogului de la Vitezda

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk?’” Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

God, as we wade into the waters of this passage, heal us and make us whole. Amen.

This fellow waited 38 years to be healed, and Jesus healed him on the Sabbath! Jesus couldn't have waited ONE MORE STINKIN' DAY to avoid this kerfuffle?

This is our fourth week in our summer series, “Wading in the Water,” where we are focusing on places where water in scripture cues and clues us to God's creative, redemptive, and revelatory action. The text we've just read is the source material for the well-known spiritual “Wade in the Water.” Howard Thurman, former chaplain of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, my alma mater, wrote:

“The ‘troubled waters’ meant the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of life. Within the context of the ‘troubled’ waters of life there are healing waters, because God is in the midst of the turmoil.”¹

¹ Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. Richmond, IN.: Friends United Press, 1970. Reprint 1990, p. 90.

As we consider the ups and downs of our time, isn't it a comfort to know God is with us in our trouble? God is with us in our turmoil. But friends, this is not a new message to you; you have heard that same song in a different verse before.

What is perplexing is that Jesus never dips a toe in the water. Neither does the one who is made well. I wonder then, what waters are stirred by this story? How does Jesus send the religious rulers' stagnant, status quo expectations rippling? If we know how Jesus sent ripples in his own context, perhaps those insights will help us make a few waves in our own time and place with the hope that God is with us in the turmoil.

Let's look at the passage again and then see if we can jazz it up a bit!

In Jerusalem there is a pool. You might have a footnote in your Bible that suggests the pool is in Bethesda. Hey! That's in Maryland. At the pool, verse 4 (which you might have to find in your footnotes) says an angel would trouble or stir up the waters, and whoever raced into the pool first would be healed of any malady. Perhaps that's why so many people are waiting in the wings of this pool.

Jesus sees a person who has been ill for 38 years and asks, "Do you want to be made well?" Strikingly, the person does not answer, at least not in the way we might expect. Instead of a hearty "absolutely!" or a resigned "why do you care?" the man says something like, "I've got no one to help me, only people who compete with me."

Jesus does not say, "Well let me help you then." He doesn't say, "I'm Jesus and I'm about to sign you up for my wholistic water aerobics program. You'll feel like you've been born again—Trade Mark." Instead he says, "Grab your mat and walk." There's no, "Your faith has made you well." Jesus didn't preach, "God is an ever-present help in times of need." Everything I might expect in a nice, serene little miracle story, Jesus bumps up against.

So our character takes his mat and walks. And we read that he's healed. All we're missing is the epilogue that says, "He lived happily ever after." Instead, we're left with an ominous, foreboding, "But it was the Sabbath."

There is a book I really enjoy entitled, *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World* by Otis Moss III, pastor of Trinity Church, Chicago. Moss encourages preachers, and I encourage you, to look and listen to the world with a Blues sensibility. Now while I like Moss's book, I am no music theorist. But I skimmed a few things and picked a few lines that captured my attention.

Consider:

- A Blues Note can mean many different things.
- The Blues expresses itself musically and metaphorically in a "different pitch than what's standard."
- The Blues results in a distinctively dissonant conflict of tonalities.

- [A Blues Note] may be a microtonal, almost imperceptible affair...including a microtonal “shake.”
- I also appreciated this line: Syncopation is defined as a disturbance or interruption of the regular flow of rhythm--a "placement of rhythmic stresses or accents where they wouldn't normally occur"²

I'm glad musicians can't tell me in the greeting line after the service if or how I bungled the music theory. But if we can focus on the metaphor rather than the music, my point (and perhaps Rev. Moss's) is that the Blues can turn destructive, dehumanizing oppression into collaborative, creative expression. And in its disruptive, dissonant, conflicted, conflicting, interruption of what is standard or status quo, we find Blues' beauty and power.

“Having a Blues sensibility,” writes Moss, “is knowing about tragedy without falling into despair....The Blues dares us to celebrate all life and find the beauty in the midst of the [what a fantastic phrase this is] magnificent mosaic of human contradiction.” The Blues helps us turn suffering to solace.

Thurman similarly notes, “There is a bottomless resourcefulness...that ultimately enables people to transform ‘the spear of frustration into a shaft of light.’ Even one’s deepest distress becomes so sanctified that a vast illumination points the way to the land one seeks. This is God in us; because of it, we stand in immediate candidacy for the power to absorb all the pain of life without destroying its joy.”

Can you listen to the story of the healing at Bethesda with a Blues sensibility? Where do you see Jesus striking a distinctively different tone than the religious leaders at the pool? Where does he disrupt the rhythms and expectations of the one who is healed? Where do we pick up those nearly imperceptible quivers—what Matthew calls the mustard seed and yeast of God’s beloved community?

The title of my sermon is “Groan and Shout” taken as a paraphrase of Ezra 3. Jews return from their captivity in Babylon and they prepare to rededicate the temple. Verses 12-13 read:

Many people who had seen the first house on its foundations wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish between the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s groan.

The groan and the shout went up together. I think that speaks to a Blues sensibility. I think that speaks to Bethesda. Here is a healing, a cause for shouts of hallelujah. But because it was the sabbath, we get a persnickety piety, a religious rumbling, a grumpy groan.

Are you thankful that Jesus seems to make so little time for religiosity? We read in our story: “Do you want to be whole...take your mat and walk. You don’t have to be baptized. You don’t even need to know my name. You don’t need to be first in the water. Today, I’m not even rubbing spit in your eyes. Just take your mat and walk.”

² Press, 1970, reprint 1990, p. 90.

How would we respond to Jesus' call for wholeness? I like Kyle Childress on this issue. He writes:

“Do we fear the cure more than the illness? It is scary to be responsible. Response-able. able to respond to God's call, able to respond to the word and love of Jesus. When we stop [making excuses] –‘I can't get to the water Jesus; there's always someone who gets there first' and start being response-able, then our legs are strong enough for us to walk beside those who are in pain and need help. Our arms are empowered to embrace our enemies and outcasts.”

I'm not sure if we can feel the weight of Jesus' question. The question for us...are we willing to be whole in Christ who calls us to something different than 38 years of poolside paralysis? We know Jesus calls us to take up more than our mats. We know that Jesus wants us to take up our crosses. We know that Jesus plays at a different pitch than the standard. We know we need to prepare ourselves for a future where churches cannot stay parked on their pallets. Jesus heals this fellow only to send him walking immediately into confrontation with angry authorities. “Who told you to take up your mat?” In this passage if we read just a little further, we'd realize we are beholding new life in Christ even as we hear plots being made against Christ's life.

Can you hear these groans and shouts going up together? At Christmas a King is born, but that king is forced into exile as a refugee. Groans and shouts go together. Easter alleluias and Good Friday groans, we don't have one without the other. From birth to death, Jesus is a Blues man through and through. Although I admit, if Jesus had a walk-up song in the Major Leagues, “Soul Man” isn't a bad way to go.

“Blues sensibilities,” I'm back to Rev. Moss again, “rescues us from acceptance and dares us to move from the couch of apathy (or resignation) to the position of work.” The history of Work songs become Gospel songs become Blues, Soul, and Freedom songs, and the distinctions between sacred and secular fade away.

Consider that first question: why couldn't Jesus wait just one more day to avoid this whole Sabbath snafu? What is one more day after 38 years? Why couldn't Jesus be a savvy savior, a smoother operator, a little more discreet? Doesn't he know the complex and tangled systems and power dynamics he is disturbing? Healing is wonderful, but during a festival?

Do you know the opening lines of King's “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”?

“My dear fellow clergymen, While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our activities ‘unwise and untimely.’”

It concludes in the second to last paragraph talking about patience.

“If I have overstated the truth or said anything indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have understated the truth or said anything indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God forgive me.”

There have been and will continue to be forces that caution moving too quickly or stridently for what is right. In the case of Bethesda, wholeness and healing can wait. In Birmingham, 1963, integration could wait.

What doesn't wait in our text today is Jesus. He sends some discordant ripples through the pools of power in Bethesda, and as the body of Christ, I sure hope we are faithful and responsible for the work God calls us to do.

I have but a very few points that might help us to that end:

First, listen to good music. I don't imagine Jesus keeps strict boundaries between the sacred and secular. I have high hopes Sam Cooke, Curtis Mayfield, and John Coltrane are in the heavenly chorus with Bach and Handel. (God can deal with Wagner however God wants!) I love the quote that one of the reasons the civil rights movement knew it was in the right was because it had the sweeter songs.

Second, I've talked so much about the Blues, and I haven't mentioned Jazz! Jazz is about improv, where people are required to listen to one another, keep tempo, hold the melody, but everyone has the right and the chance to solo, to be unique, to bring something special that no one else in the whole world can do quite like you. The church is like that—sure we do things together, but it isn't the same without you being you!

Third, order and structure will only get you so far, and in today's story, they don't get you to health and wholeness. I know some Presbyterians like things to be done decently and in order. How do I know them? I see one in the mirror when I brush my teeth. Jesus tells us to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves. That's what these times call for; that's what all times call for.

Finally, the kingdom of heaven is worth all of it. You think you want to be in the good graces of religious elites, it doesn't get higher than Jesus. In the troubled waters, that's where we cast our nets. In the troubled waters, that's the origin of the pearl of great price. In the troubled waters of the Red Sea the Hebrews found liberty. Wading into the waters of the Jordan, people found a place of promise. In the waters of baptism, we find belonging. And in the living water of Jesus Christ we find forgiveness, healing, and wholeness. Wade in for the ways God is creating all things anew. Wade in for the ways God is redeeming all things together. Wade in to discover how God reveals love, mercy, and purpose for us. Wade in.