

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

sermon digest

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John 5:2-18

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In 1921, several years before entering politics, Franklin D. Roosevelt contracted polio and suffered total paralysis of his lower body. He had both the wealth and the will to search out remedies for his dysfunctional legs and found comfort in an ancient remedy known as hydrotherapy, water treatment. The primary medicinal function of hydrotherapy has been the transfer of heat and cold to parts of the body, but water also serves as an excellent exercise medium. Roosevelt was so convinced of the benefit of water exercise that he purchased a resort in Warm Springs, Georgia, where he founded a hydrotherapy center for polio victims still in operation today.

The picture of the disabled, crowded around a pool of water, is older than the New Testament and wider than Judaism. The healing properties of water have been used to treat disease for thousands of years. Beyond the real and obvious properties of water, belief in magic and the supernatural was often added to the picture, promising a complete reversal of conditions for which there was no known cure. In 2 Kings 5, Naaman, the commander of the armies of Aram, had leprosy. His king heard about the powerful God of the Jews and appealed to the king of Israel for help. The Prophet Elisha came on the scene and ordered Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan River. Evidently Naaman was familiar with hydrotherapy. He was angered by Elisha's choice of the Jordan rather than the pure waters of Damascus. When he finally followed orders like a good soldier and was healed, the credit did not go to the muddy Jordan River or to some magic formula given by the prophet. He was convinced: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel (v 15)." The cure was not about magic or the invasion of the supernatural into the realm of nature; it was an act of God. The story of Naaman became a Christian metaphor for baptism.

Random healing is cruel, but usual. We are familiar with the language "cruel and unusual punishment" from the US Constitution. Government punishment intended to inflict pain even for heinous crime is disallowed by the Constitution, but random infliction of pain by nature is quite normal. We might even say that nature inflicts cruel and *usual* punishment on people. People normally do not get what they want just because they want it or what they deserve because they are better or worse than their neighbors. However, the picture of nature that favors the strong over the weak in random acts of healing is familiar ground for the human story.

Recent translations of the Bible exclude verse four from our text: "For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had." Translators agree that this is a gloss, added by some scribe to explain the context of the healing miracle of Jesus. There is no doubt that it is an addition to the original text, but it does help to explain the response of the lame man to the question of Jesus, "Do you want to be made well?" Rather than an expression of his will or hope for healing, the man went into defensive mode, explaining his failure. When the water was stirred, someone always beat him to the healing water. Paul Duke declared Bethesda to be a cruel place that promised mercy to the weak while serving the strong (*Review & Expositor*, summer, 1988, 539).

The Hebrew name Bethesda means house of mercy. The pool with its five porticoes was discovered by archaeologists in Jerusalem in the late nineteenth century. One can easily conjecture that the pool was fed by a spring deep in the mountain that periodically released water into the pool creating movement in the otherwise placid bath. The angel explanation was typical of an era that looked beyond natural to supernatural explanations for everything.

Of greater importance, the magic here was totally out of sync with the Jewish understanding of a God of compassion. The impersonal power of the spring contributed nothing to the faith of the Jewish population. "First in—first served" as a condition of healing contradicted everything the Jews had been taught about the acts of God in history. It may fit with kindergarten justice, but not the justice of God. The God of Israel was known to defend the weak against the strong. If the more athletic or the more able among the disabled around the pool were preferred for healing, it was certainly not a condition consistent with the God of Israel; but the angel story is a good example of how folklore tends to take precedence over good theology. Religion has never belonged to the intellectuals. It has always rested more in the superstitions, fears, and longings of the people than in the deep thinkers of a culture.

Why me? The question applies both to people who have found healing and for those who continue to struggle with their pain. John Calvin found a simple solution in his theology of universal sin. The total depravity of humankind means that all of us deserve to suffer, but God chooses some for health and salvation. God's electing grace is a random choice that transcends human understanding and human justice. Calvin believed in the absolute sovereignty of God that often comes across as cold and impersonal. At least Calvin struggled to deal with the issue of choice in suffering and sickness.

If we are wrong to ask "why me?" in the midst of suffering, we also ought to avoid boasting "because of me" in the face of healing. My years of pastoral ministry at bedsides of suffering and dying saints and sinners with absolutely no indication of difference in the justice of health and sickness has taught me stay away from conclusions that in reality prove nothing.

If superstition about the angel stirring the waters at the Pool of Bethesda was cruel, what about the random choice of the man that Jesus healed? The choice bothers us, but it also fits the norm. Leslie Weatherhead, an English pastor during World War II, was controversial because of his rejection of some of some of the traditions of his faith. His interest in psychology and healing led to a book *Psychology, Religion, and Healing* in which he observed that unexplainable healings have been observed and documented in our age, but he found that they do not conform to justice or faith. Sometimes the benefactors are children or people who have no real interest in religion—perhaps like the man at the Pool of Bethesda.

The same question applies to most of the healing miracles in the New Testament. Many interpreters have taken offense at the patient's passive personality. All the initiative in the story belongs to Jesus. The man is a defeated soul, deeply depressed, with no energy left to contend for his health. He had lived with his condition for thirty-eight years. No wonder he was depressed! When he is healed, he seems to lack gratitude for the one responsible. He took no interest in the one who healed him until he was challenged by the religious leaders for violating a Sabbath rule. Then, instead of taking responsibility for his newfound ability to walk, he blamed the stranger who had disappeared into the crowd for instructing him to rise, take up his mat and walk. John's storytelling technique consistently involves irony and confusion. The obvious center of this story focuses on the healing of a man who has been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, but the religious leaders are so intense about the Sabbath Law that they cannot see the real issue behind carrying a mat.

We are left in a cloud of confusion. Why would Jesus pick this man among all of the people around the pool? It certainly was not because of his superior faith, better disposition, or higher motivation. I recall the early days when kidney dialysis became available, but there were not enough machines to go around to everyone who was suffering from kidney failure. Rather than leaving the decision to the medical professionals, hospitals formed community committees to evaluate the candidates and choose a path of justice. The concern of justice still exists in this age of organ transplants. Who lives and who dies, and who is to decide?

On the one hand, I am sure that none of us have a right to boast of superiority because we have become benefactors of modern medicine or of healing experiences that exceed the reach and comprehension of modern medicine. I learned a long time ago not to look for justice in the random events of sickness and health. Rain and tornadoes tend to fall on the good and the bad.

Read the sign. Not exclusively but normally in John's Gospel, the miracles of Jesus are called *signs*: they are events that direct attention beyond the moment and circumstance of the miracle to a higher, eternal truth. What is the sign here? Where is this event directing our attention so that we reach a higher understanding and perhaps a new conclusion about the nature of God?

Although the setting at the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem is unique to John, many of the features in the story are found in the healing of the lame man in Mark 2, Matthew 9, and Luke 5. In every case the same formula, "rise, take your mat, and walk," appears. In John the issue is about the violation of the Sabbath because Jesus commanded an illegal act of carrying a burden on the Sabbath. While straining to formulate the conditions of human behavior on the Jewish Sabbath, the day when the Creator rested from the task of creation, the rabbis debated the behavior of God on the Sabbath. Does God's rest mean passive withdrawal. The issue in the other Gospels tends to focus on the question of doing good or evil on this day of rest, usually the question of healing. Can the ox be

rescued from the ditch on the Sabbath? The word of Jesus in John is that God at work; therefore, he is at work.

Beyond all else, the healing of the man beside the pool was a sign of God's continuing, active presence in our world. Like the religious leaders in conflict with Jesus, people who cannot distinguish good things that are happening in our world are usually blind to the presence and activity of God in the world. If you cannot see the good of a man walking after thirty-eight years on the ground, you need to have your spiritual vision corrected.

The more things change, the more they are the same. Folks who become obsessed with defending the institutions of religion are the most likely to be blind to the acts of God under their very noses. Let those who have eyes to see, look at the good that is all around us and join in the chorus, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"