

TROUBLED WATERS

Clark Downs, March 4, 2008

“Now there is in Jerusalem a pool which is called Bethesda. Around it lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, malformed, waiting for the moving of the water: An angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.”

In John 5, Jesus comes upon one such invalid; he asks the man if he would be made well. The response is significant. In essence he says: “Well, yeah; but that ain’t going to happen any time soon. Every time I try to enter the pool while it is bubbling someone barges ahead of me.” The invalid is blind to the possibility that new life can be obtained by another means—in this case Jesus.

March 4, 2008

Nevertheless, Jesus tells the man to take up his mat. He does and, without so much as a thank you, walks into the temple area.

There the Jewish authorities, the Pharisees, want to know who said it was all right to walk around carrying a bedroll on the Sabbath. The man has no idea. In the meantime, Jesus disappears into the crowd, to avoid bringing attention to his healing powers.

Later, Jesus enters the temple area and talks to the man he made well. The man then tells the Pharisees Jesus was the man that healed him. In turn, the Jews persecute Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. In his defense, Jesus says he is only doing the work of God his father. This infuriates the monotheist Pharisees who want to kill Jesus because he broke Sabbath and claims to be God's equal.

March 4, 2008

So what is the big deal about healing on the Sabbath? In the years leading to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD and the decades that followed, Jerusalem was fractured religiously and politically. What bound the Temple community together were ritual observances based on the law of Moses, the most important of which were circumcision, food laws and Sabbath keeping. Jesus' work on the Sabbath threatened the moral standards and authority of the Pharisees. What would become of their superior social standing if the tradition they guarded so zealously were disrespected by brazen breaking of Sabbath law or drinking from the same cup as a Samaritan woman? And who was this Jesus who dared to say that he was one with the Father?

In thinking about John's Gospel, it occurs to me that we too lie

March 4, 2008

close by Bethesda, not only geographically but metaphorically.

The ritualistic practices of first century Judaism were born of human invention. The message of John 5 is that the incarnate Word brings new life to human existence in a way that transcends human rules, rituals and rulers. Jesus is not bound by Sabbath law or any other human religious tradition or ritual practice. In other words, our relationship with God through Jesus does not depend on how closely we adhere to any liturgical practice or who is in the pulpit.

Today, our version of Sabbath law focuses on such things as who may be installed as a bishop, the manner in which the host is consecrated and the placement of the baptismal font. These are in greater or lesser degree important questions for a religious community because such shared practices are what binds a

March 4, 2008

community together. However, John 5 puts these issues in two starkly contrasting perspectives. The Pharisees are focused on conventional religious order, and preserving their social position and religious authority. Jesus' interaction with the invalid highlights an alternative way of relationship with God through his presence in the incarnate Word. The new life Jesus brings to the invalid symbolically stands for the new life that Jesus by his incarnation, death and resurrection offers to all who would believe in him. But by clinging to Sabbath law, the Pharisees reject the new life that Jesus offers. Will we be like the Pharisees and cling to Sabbath law, or will we instead be children of the Light who move past human rules to love the Lord our God with all our souls, minds and hearts and love our neighbors as ourselves?

March 4, 2008

There can be no doubt that our waters have been troubled. I hope, I pray, that God will bless us all with the patience to wait for the same spiritual healing Jesus gave to an earlier invalid at Bethesda.