

Reflection on John 5:1-18
March 16, 2010

When I first read this story, I thought to myself, what an appropriate subject for a doctor, one of the healing miracles of Jesus, until I read between the lines and reflected on it. This is really quite an odd story for one of Jesus miracles.

Jesus is at the pool of Bethesda and meets a man who has been ill for a long time and has given up the likelihood of a cure. He asks a very simple question of the man: "Do you want to be made well?" Instead of just answering Jesus question, the man launches into an explanation of why he has not been made well. "It's not my fault, there is no one to help me into the pool". It is almost a defensive answer and unexpected as the question asked is in no way accusatory. Of course, this may be a literary device that sets us up for the end of the story, but I think we can milk it a little for meaning. Why does the man not answer simply: "Yes, I have been ill a long time and I would like nothing better than to be well again!"? Despite his "non-answer" Jesus heals the man and slips away in the crowd. Enter the bad guys: the fundamentalist Jews, pointing out that it is unlawful to heal on the Sabbath. The man does not know who healed him and so cannot answer them. It should just end there.

But, the plot thickens. The man meets Jesus later in the temple court. He recognizes him and Jesus tells him to amend his life so that nothing worse may happen to him. It was the common belief that illness or deformity came as a result of sin as a punishment. What is odd in this story, and perhaps typical of human nature, is the man's response. Instead of expressing gratitude for his healing, he goes and tells the Jews that it was Jesus who healed him on the Sabbath. Was this revenge for being accused of being a sinner or an attempt to curry favor with the people in power? Perhaps it was a little of both. We really have no way of knowing. Perhaps this is a story that has been manipulated to tell the story of the rising animosity of the Pharisees, which is necessary for the eventual arrest and condemnation of Jesus.

For us this morning, I do not think it matters if this is an accurate rendition of the events or not. We have a depiction of a common response of human nature to being "found out". More often than not, confronted with our failings, we excuse ourselves and act out of our worst selves. Being confronted with our shortcomings and failures can be a moment of grace if we are willing to be honest about ourselves, put aside anger and excuse and decide to change. Another term for that experience is conversion.

I wonder what would have happened to the man in our story if instead of being told to go and sin no more, or something worse will happen to you, he was told: "Live a life worthy of the gift you have been given". As I have mulled this story over in my heart, that is what I hear: "Live a life worthy of the gift that you have been given". What might that life look like?

First of all, I think a life touched by the grace of God is a grateful life. I keep a small notebook on my desk at work and try to note in it each morning something that I am grateful for. Often it is hard to come up with something when I am stressed and overworked and over-worried. Sometimes it is just a simple thing like how pretty the sun is on the morning clouds, or finding a good

parking place. I have learned though, that being in the habit of gratefulness makes the appearance of things to be grateful for more likely. Being grateful is a sure cure for being angry or resentful. Staying grateful keeps me humble. What I am grateful for did not come from me, it was gifted to me.

Another quality of a life touched by God's grace is that it is gracious. The Dalai Lama would call this living a life of compassion. Either word has a largesse about it that transcends the petty and unimportant. When I can act in graciousness, it is returned to me many-fold, in a peaceful environment with others and with myself. I think being gracious with others is a gift that comes from knowing that both I, and the other are held and loved unconditionally by God. In my experience, this works even when I do not feel very gracious. Behaving graciously often yields the good feeling afterwards, not beforehand. In his book: "Mere Christianity" C. S. Lewis talks about behaving as if something were true until we experience it as really true. The behaving "as if" really changes the experience. I think that in behaving graciously to others we experience the graciousness of God toward us, and when we do, behaving graciously is just second nature.

Finally, a life that is touched by the grace of God is a generous, not just in goods, but in attitude and actions. I remember a story I heard Morton Kelsey tell at a retreat I once attended. He made the observation that there was a meeting of an Altar Guild at a church where he was serving. The members of the meeting were discussing, rather viciously, the failings of an absent member. One member of the meeting, who had remained silent spoke up and said "but hasn't she done a marvelous job with her son" and it stopped the vivisection cold. That was a generous heart speaking. It was an example of bringing light into darkness and dissipating it. Sometimes being a "Light to the Nations" starts with the smallest generous comment close to home.

So, as we approach Holy Week and the celebration of the gracious gift to us in the life and death of Jesus, I exhort each of us to consider living a life worthy of the gift we have been given. Let us find ways everyday to be grateful, gracious and generous in response to the gift of God's life in us.

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