

Go to the Head of the Line  
John 5:1-9  
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Where is verse four? Can someone read for me verse four? My Bible doesn't have it! Well, although it is not essential to understand tonight's passage, it does help to know what was included in many ancient manuscripts, though not in all, that according to legend, and to the missing verse 4, the pool at which this man, and countless others, had camped himself, was known to have waters that healed, especially when an angel of the Lord came to stir up the water. The first one to dip in his or her toe after the angel's agitation was healed, and unfortunately, all the rest were left unfulfilled, and had to position themselves for the next chance, whenever it might come. Whether they stood a fighting chance or not didn't matter for those who didn't have many options left. It was the poolside, or the roadside. Enough people came to the pool who could be begged from so it was a place you could stay to keep out of the elements, and also have that one in a million shot at being healed.

Perhaps those odds were only slightly better than those of what happened the day Jesus came by, and seemingly randomly chosen the guy with thirty-eight years of suffering under his belt. We are told that Jesus "knew that he had been there for a long time," with a strong hint that this was divine knowledge. I say that Jesus' selection was seemingly random because I find it hard to believe that his divine

knowledge stopped at that one guy's condition. And it certainly wouldn't have been hard to see hundreds of other candidates. But Jesus chooses this guy, and he wins the Jerusalem lottery, picks up his mat and walks away. In a world accustomed to the whims of Monopoly rules like "Go directly to jail. Do not pass Go!, Do not collect \$200," this guy hears, "Go directly to health. Do not pass the pool of Bethzatha, do not enter the water."

My first thought when reading this story was that Jesus must love even line jumpers, those people who are too selfish to wait in line like decent citizens until their turn comes, like at the amusement park, or at the traffic light in front of the Panasonic; people who are in such a hurry that they have to inconvenience everyone else who is playing by the rules, and indeed make things worse; people for whom, in my version of creation, there is a special place reserved in hell. Only someone who love line jumpers would take a guy who by every measure is at the back of the line and deal with him not only first before the others there, but only with him. But then I realized that in this story there is no line, at least not a line we can see, or one that the lame man could get into. There was no queue; there were no rules. There was just desperate chaos, and a struggle to reach the water before anyone else, or so we are told by the man Jesus chooses to heal. In a sick kind of twist on a wonderful blessing, the ones who were least in need had the best chance, because they were less limited by their disabilities. This was not first come, first served. There was no neatly formed line, no ticket system where you were called to

the front in the order in which you had arrived. There was not even a line for senior citizens, pregnant women, and clients with young children! There was no one looking out for anyone else, no one sacrificing him or herself for others who suffered more. At least no one who had camped at the Pool of Beth-zatha.

In the story immediately preceding this one, we have almost the complete opposite scenario, but almost exactly the same result. In that first story, a “royal official,” presumably a Gentile, seeks Jesus, asks for his intervention for his dying son, “believes” what Jesus tells him, that his son will be cured, and finally, believes in Jesus himself and becomes a follower. In our story tonight, the lame man does not seek out Jesus, but rather, Jesus finds him. He does not ask for Jesus’ help, but rather, even when Jesus gives him the opportunity to ask for it, he refers back only to his helpless situation, and the selfishness of others instead of availing himself of Jesus’ presence. And finally, there is no faith or belief to be found, either before, during, or after the episode at the pool, as the man is not recognized for his faith, as in other stories in the Gospel, and goes on his merry way, with nary a thank you to Jesus, much less an act of discipleship. Two very different stories, one very similar result. What are we to make of this interesting fact?

Perhaps one conclusion we can draw is that we have no idea what really goes on in the divine mind! Our concerns with divine justice and fairness fly right out of the window when held up to these stories which, taken together, remind me a great deal of the parable of the workers in the vineyard, all of whom are paid the

same wages even though some work more or less than others. Our sense of fairness is turned on its head, always the first step toward recognizing grace. We are left once again with that humbling mysteriousness of God, a good thing considering our addiction to certainty.

Another lesson to be learned is that there is no one special type of person with whom Jesus is concerned as he works his Father's will. In addition to all the other differences between the two stories, there is also this: that the two objects of Jesus' compassion could not be more different socially, or economically, or educationally, or politically. One is a member of the royal court, the other a resident of what is basically an invalid's ward under a bridge. Indeed, in the first five chapters of John, we have seen a very wide variety of people with whom Jesus has interacted, from prophets like John, to fishermen like Peter, from well-to-do Pharisees like Nicodemus, to nameless Samaritan women drawing water from the local well. Each of these people who encounter Jesus are distinct from one another, with their own contexts paving the way for their meeting with Jesus. There are no linkages between them, no pattern among them, except the pattern Jesus brings to them of sharing with them God's mercy, and the offer of abundant life. Some respond, some do not, but Jesus offers it to all.

I hope that is good news to you tonight, or that it has been to you in the past, that what God has done in Jesus Christ is not reserved only for those who, at least, on the surface, deserve it, nor for those, who, even all the way to the bone do not

deserve it, but that it is for all of us. There is nothing redeeming about the lame man who takes up his mat and walks away, except that he too, underneath his grime, and his despair, and his cynicism, and his hopelessness, and his twisted legs, is a child of the same God who looks beyond each of our faults, and conditions, and hurts and hopes. There is nothing so honorable or noble or worthy about the royal official that he merits Jesus' time, except that he too is a child of the same God who looks beyond our best characteristics, our good looks, our education, or the fortunate circumstances of our births. Praise God that neither our achievements nor our failures are the basis on which God grants us grace, but rather a divine mercy and love higher, broader, and deeper than any division we can make among ourselves.

Finally, it suggests that the ministry we do in Jesus' name must be done whether the recipient of it ultimately confesses Christ or not. The author of the Gospel of John could easily have chosen another story in which Jesus gets into trouble with the authorities, a story in which the recipient of his miracle is both grateful and comes to faith, much as the father does in the preceding story. Surely there were many more stories with a happier ending that also provoked the wrath of the powers that be. But John chooses this one, unsatisfying end and all. I wouldn't bet the farm that his purpose in doing so was to remind Jesus' followers that they should serve without regard for the end result, but I would make that case now for you on the basis of the evidence that just as God does not choose us on the

basis of either our tangibles or intangibles, neither did God send Jesus Christ on the basis of whether we would follow or not. As unsettling as it may be, the truth is still that even those who experience the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ still go away unconvinced. But none would have the opportunity if it were not provided for all. Thanks be to God that it is not left up to us to choose who is worthy of our time and energy and love, for woe betide us if we judge wrongly who is likely to respond and who is not, if we are the ones to deem them worthy. Indeed, even such an exercise in judgment delays us in our call to love in the name of Jesus Christ. Some will accept it and some will reject it, but we are called to offer it to all.

Tonight we celebrate what God is doing in and through our congregation, a congregation chosen by God from among those who once lay upon mats beside a pool of broken dreams, and from among those who once dreamt on satin pillows. Isn't that a remarkable thing? That the hearts, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ come together on no other basis than the grace of God? May we find an empowering humility in knowing that we have been called to go the head of the line, no matter where we started. Amen.