The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C.
8:00 a.m. and 10:30 a.m.
May 25, 2025

"Wade in the Water"

Jesus is not always the easiest guy to read. He teaches in enigmatic parables. He performs miracles and then insists that no one speak a word about them. He says that he has come to fulfill the scriptures and then allows his followers to break some of those teachings right in front of the Pharisees. He loves and cares for everyone, but he is harsh with the Pharisees and the wealthy. He teaches his disciples to take on his ministry after his death, but keeps calling them faithless.

Another odd habit of Jesus is how he approaches people in need of help. Whenever he encounters someone in need, even obvious need, such as a blind person or a cripple, he almost always asks them "What do you want me to do for you?" you would think he knew that. But Jesus never assumes, at least not until today's passage from John 5:1-9.

To give context to this healing, there are several important aspects to note. Jesus has gone up to Jerusalem.[1] When he arrives, he seems to have entered through the Sheep Gate. One of the gates faces the north. Near that entry into Jerusalem was a pool called Beth-zatha or Bethesda. In English, these names mean either House of Healing or House of Grace. People with illnesses, injuries, or disabilities gather near this pool hoping for healing. They believed that when the water in the pool was disturbed, it is the work of an angel. After the water is stirred up or troubled[2] the first person into the pool is healed. Which, by the way, inspired a portion of the spiritual called "Wade in the Water." The refrain goes:

> "Wade in the water,
> wade in the water, children,
> Wade in the water,
> God's a-gonna trouble the water."[3]

When Jesus enters the area of the pool, he notices a man lying there. Jesus can tell the man has been there for a long time; the man will tell him he has been waiting for healing for thirty-eight years. Rather than asking the man what he wants, Jesus poses a different and almost accusatory question. He asks the man, "Do you want to be made well?" Again, we might think that is an obvious question given the man's infirmity and that he is lying near a pool for healing. But this time it may not be so obvious.

The man does not answer Jesus with a resounding "yes" as we might expect. Instead, he explains how healing at the pool works, and then tells Jesus he has never been able to be the first one in the pool after the water has been stirred up. That response does not sound like that of a man seeking healing. It sounds like he has gotten used to being "sick." Or perhaps he has given up seeking healing after so many years of failure. Or maybe he just doesn't believe that healing is possible for him. Whatever the reason, he does not seem eager to be healed.

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[1] Remember no matter how you approach Jerusalem one always goes up to Jerusalem even if they parachute in. Whenever one leaves Jerusalem, they always go down even in a rocket.

[2] Troubling the water was how the King James Version translated the Greek that in modern translations is "stirred up."

[3] *Lift Every Voice and Sing: II*, #143

Jesus realizes that the man has an impediment to being healed. Instead of pursuing the conversation, he simply tells the man to stand up. The man does not hesitate, he just gets up, picks up his mat, and walks away. The reading ends with the ominous last line, "Now that day was a Sabbath." Which is going to take the story in another direction.

For now, let's stick with this healing and the questions it raises. What makes the story so compelling is the questions it asks about our desire to be healed. How many of us have become so used to our illnesses or injuries that we would not know how to answer if Jesus asked us, "Do you want to be made well?"

We all need healing. what is your sickness? Perhaps, it is a physical ailment. Perhaps it is the healing of a relationship, a brokenness between you and another. Perhaps you need a spiritual healing because you feel distant from God or your own heart. Could it be a healing from a hurt you have experienced? For example, when someone wronged you with words or in your body. We know those hurts can stay for a long time. It is even worse when we feel ashamed that we were hurt in that way. We could feel responsible for the hurt we suffered. That somehow, we brought it on ourselves, even when we know that it is not true.

We do not know what made the man in the portico sick. We do not know why his illness has lasted so long. We do not know if his sickness was physical or mental. All we know is that it has lasted for thirty-eight years. It must have been terrible because he was unable to get help even when he knew where and how to do so.

I hope that it is possible for each of us to get the help we need. If we don't know what to do to be healed, what we can do is put ourselves in Jesus' hands. Take a chance in prayer or meditation to pray, "Jesus, I hurt. Is it possible I could be made well? I don't know how to do it. I also don't know what I would do with my life if that pain or illness were gone. It has been a part of me for so long. It is like it is me and I am it. Am I more than this pain? Could I be free of it and still be me? Would it really be better to be free of the pain? Help me to know. Help me to get up. Help me to put away the pain and be able to literally or figuratively walk away from it and all that it means. I want to walk into a new life where people see me and not my pain."

It is a scary thing to think of giving up the pain. It is scary because it is unfamiliar territory. As the saying goes, "Better the devil I know than the devil I don't." But perhaps it is not a new devil but an angel that replaces it.

So don't wait for the water to be troubled, just wade in. Take the chance. Accept Jesus' invitation to healing. Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk.