

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**C: Easter 6 – Service of the Word for Healing**

**29 April 2016**

**John 5.1-9  
Acts 16:4-15**

**Salem  
Bridgeport**

**“If at First You Don’t Succeed...”**

The man had been an invalid there for 38 years.

Since invalids didn’t have a great life expectancy back then,  
chances are he had been coming here since he was a child, brought there by his parents.  
They had likely waited by that pool for many hours over many days,  
waiting for that magic bubbling to occur,  
the strange stirring of the waters that happened from time to time  
Some claimed the stirring was done by angels,  
while others dismissed it as simply the result of an underground spring.  
Some claimed the bubbling water had healing power; others were more cynical.  
His parents weren’t sure who was right, but they hoped fervently for healing for their child.  
But they couldn’t wait with him forever – there was work to do, other children to tend. Life went on.  
And so eventually they had taken to leaving him there, with others like him,  
and he had become one of the “regulars”.  
Lying beside the pool had become his way of life.

And then one day, a stranger came along and asked how long he had been there.  
“38 years”, the man replied.  
And then the man said to him, “Do you want to get well?”

What a ludicrous question! Of course he wanted to get well! Why else would he be lying there?  
But there was something in that question that had made him feel a bit defensive.  
And so he said, “...I don’t have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, it’s too late.”  
It wasn’t his fault, after all. It was just how things were.  
And there was no one around who could do anything about it.

Our first reaction to Jesus’ question might be similar. Of course the man wanted to get well!  
But did he? It had been 38 years, for goodness’ sake!  
Yes, there is something to be said for the old axiom, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”  
But for 38 years????! Really????!  
Most things in life take a bit of practice, so it would be folly to try things only once.  
Trying again, practicing, persisting, are virtues – as long as you’re making progress.  
But trying again and again with nothing to show for it is lunacy.  
As Albert Einstein said,  
“Trying the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is the definition of insanity.”  
It’s never going to get us where we want to go.

So Jesus simply asks the important question: Do you want to get well?

And then, notice what Jesus does NOT do:

He doesn’t pray; he doesn’t lift the man into the pool; he doesn’t lay his hands on him;  
he doesn’t engage him in conversation about why he’s been lying there for 38 years;  
he doesn’t ask him about his faith;  
he doesn’t even wait for the man to affirm that yes, he does want to get well!

He just says, "Get up, take your mat, and go."

And the man gets up, takes up his mat, and walks away from the pool, away from his friends,  
away from everything that is routine and ordinary and expected,  
away from life as he has known it for 38 years.

What an amazing story! And what a gift that God has given it to us!

For in some way or another, we are all that man.

Unless we have reached all of our goals and realized all our dreams  
and are living the abundant life Jesus' promises 100% of the time,  
there are places in our lives where we find ourselves wanting something  
and waiting for something to happen that will get us to our dream.

If only someone would lift that man into the water...

If only I had enough money...

If only I had more time...

If only I had the chance...

If only my spouse would behave differently...

If only my family hadn't screwed me up...

If only I had a different boss or a different job...

Anytime we have such thoughts, we are that man,

waiting at the pool for someone to do something to get us where we want to go,  
and Jesus comes and asks us,

"Do you want to get well? Do you want to be whole? Do you want abundant life?"

"Then, get up and start walking."

But where? Which direction?

The answer to that lies in our first lesson from Acts where we hear the story of Paul.

Now Paul wasn't waiting by the pool. He'd already gotten up and had started walking.

And, believe it or not, he went off in the wrong direction – more than once!

First he headed for Asia Minor – but somehow he got the message that that was not God's will.

The writer of acts tells us that Paul was "forbidden by the Holy Spirit",

which could mean any number of things –

maybe it was the weather, or a warning from someone, or their guide got sick.

We're not told what it was exactly, but it felt like that particular door had closed,

and for Paul, that was God at work, directing him away from somewhere.

So then he decides to go to Bithynia,

but again God is at work, closing one door to propel Paul on to the next.

Maybe after so many false starts, Paul is beginning to have doubts or be frustrated,

so this time, God acts in a more direct manner, through a vivid dream calling Paul to Macedonia.

There's another saying, "If at first you don't succeed, you are in excellent company". And so we are.

Just as we may begin waiting with the man beside the pool,

when we get up, we may start walking with Paul in the wrong direction.

But that's how our faith journey works for all of God's people – walking step by step,

while God closes the wrong doors to keep us walking in the direction of the right one.

Today we come with hope for healing and wholeness, and with eager longing for life in all its abundance.

The good news of our gospel is that it is available here and now.

We can continue to do the things that keep us waiting right where we are –

so close and yet so far away from salvation.

Or we can get up and moving in a different direction,

trusting in the promise, the presence, and the power

of the One who is risen – who is risen indeed! Hallelujah! **Amen**