

*Illusion of Self-Sufficiency*  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Mothers' Day, May 13, 2007  
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**John 5:1-9**

**Acts 16:9-15**

It was a time of festival for the Jews. And so, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in the northeast corner of Jerusalem, near the Sheep gate, there was a pool. This pool was known for its healing properties. In fact, legend had it that the first person into the water after it was stirred up by the Lord's angel, would be healed. So it was natural for people seeking healing to gather there. On Jesus' journey, he came upon this famous pool and saw all who were lying there: the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. There was one man there, though, who drew his attention. He knew that this man had been there for thirty-eight years. We overhear the conversation between Jesus and this man. "Do you want to be made well?" "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

Recently, in my leafing through catalogs of worship, education, theology – really all kinds of materials – I came across a packet of CDs called *The Bible Experience*. It is a dramatic reading aloud of the entire New Testament. I debated but not long. Of course I bought it. Then I justified the purchase by thinking to myself that it could help me with my Bible and prayer time. I could listen to passages as I drove up and down 93, on my way up and back from church. It would be a time-saver. So this was how I first heard the text for today. Driving along, I pushed the CD player button, expecting to relax back into another person's reading. But I didn't relax long. It's surprising I didn't hit the car in front of me. I was completely unprepared for the jolt I received. This dramatic reading out loud of John's text crawled right under my skin. In fact, I completely missed Exit 4 on route 93 as I was driving up to the church.

I had always heard this text as one of Jesus' healing miracles. And it is that. A man is ill. He has been ill for 38 years. Jesus comes along, has compassion on him and heals him. It's not that such a healing is not miraculous. But I think it's easy to become immune to such healings in the gospel text. I mean, after all, that's what Jesus does. He heals people. So this story is just one more proof of that. Something we probably know about Jesus even if we've never before been to church. Or confirmation of something we have known and heard ever since we were baptized as babies or put into a toddler classroom by our parents. Jesus heals people. That's one of the reasons we come to church. But somehow this healing power can sometimes lose its impact because it loses its surprise. It's what we expect.

The jolt I received as I drove past my exit on route 93 was that I heard the text differently. I was even more taken aback when I began to register just what my reaction was. I was angry. Really angry. And my focus was not on Jesus. It was on the man who was ill. The man who had been ill for 38 years. Can you imagine? 38 years is a very long time. This may not sound very politically correct, because as Christians we are

supposed to reach out and help others, but what was this man thinking? Thirty-eight years he sat there and not once in all that time – probably most of a life in those days – did he ask someone to help him into the pool. Not once did he ask a bystander, “could you give me a hand?” That’s what he says to Jesus: “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” I felt like asking him what on earth he was doing. Why didn’t he ask for help?

These gospel stories have lots of holes in them. I mean, we’re really not given a lot of information much of the time. Here we have a conversation of only three lines between Jesus and the man who is ill. That’s all. But that’s a good thing. Because it’s in those holes that we make our own home in the text. It’s in those holes that we too become part of the story. It’s in those holes that we respond in different ways at different times to the story. Now I could have censored my response to this text this past week. I could have said that my anger was completely out of line. Because I really didn’t like it very much, at least not at first. I really didn’t like the fact that it felt as though I were blaming the victim. Do I expect people in need to always have to ask for help? Isn’t it the job of those of us in a position to help to do the reaching out? To take the initiative? I didn’t like where my emotions were taking me, but I knew I was going there for a reason, so I decided to follow.

And then the cruel shock came. This man is just like me. He’s just like lots of us. We think we’re self-sufficient. We talk a lot about being in community, about helping each other. And when others are involved, we’re right there helping out. Which is wonderful. But what happens when we are the ones who need the help? Well, that is a different story. We’re taken right back to our three-year-old selves. “Mom, I can do it myself.” There is a saying that has reverberated within me throughout my life, when I have let it. “Well, you just have to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps.” When something is wrong, when you’re desperately in need of others, don’t let them know. You’re the one who has to pick yourself up. I remember trying to picture this when I was a teenager. Just how would I accomplish this? Stand there and pick myself up at the same time. Hmm, pretty tricky. Physically it just doesn’t seem possible. Which is, I suppose, the point of the expression.

We have it somehow ingrained in us to be self-sufficient. While self-sufficiency is not always a bad thing, when taken to extremes, it can become a real problem. And we may not always grasp the depth of the problem: how violent our reliance on self-sufficiency can be. Surely it’s violent that the man by the pool sat there for 38 years, thinking he had to do it all by himself. I watched a Frontline piece on public broadcasting a few nights ago talking about juveniles in the United States who are incarcerated for life without parole. Incredibly there are about 2200 of them compared to only 12 in the rest of the world. One of the stories was of a family who lived in a beautiful house in Colorado, an isolated house, up on a hill, with a beautiful view of the mountains. A location which, despite its beauty, radiated isolation and self-sufficiency. But caged within this house lived a family in so much emotional pain that the 16-year-old murdered his mother and step-father. Somehow, like the man by the Sheep Gate pool, this boy was held hostage to a family, a culture, a way of thinking that left getting any kind of help simply out of the question.

We do have self-sufficiency ingrained in us. Our culture is a culture which elevates self-sufficiency to the level of an icon. It's not that self-sufficiency on its own is a bad thing. It's part of our national history, an important and good part. We had to survive by our own instincts and ingenuity when our forebears first arrived on this continent. We admire those who braved the wilderness, forging their way across this continent. But sometimes it seems as if we have taken the stream of self-sufficiency and turned it into all there is. We sometimes forget that there are other streams in our history as well. Even more important for us here today, human maturity and wholeness, as defined by our Christian faith, has very little to do with self-sufficiency as so many of us tend to see it. We are baptized into a Christian family which is not our biological family. We are called into a chosen family, a family that is to be intentional about wanting and needing to love one another. That is what mature Christian personhood looks like. That's what Jesus wants us to do. In this Christian faith of ours, our baptism is also our goal, the end toward which we are moving. To be in healthy and loving relationship with one another, with God, and with all creation.

Today is Mothers Day, and here is my message in few succinct words. We need each other. Plain and simple. We need each other. We see that need so clearly in very young children. Sometimes I sit in McDonald's and watch parents or other adults with babies or toddlers and I am awed at just how vulnerable those children are. What would happen if that adult simply walked away? What does happen when that adult simply walks away? What does happen when our culture simply walks away? The child is left there alone, on a cold, hard plastic seat. Where would he go? What would she do? Needing others is at the very core of who children are. It is at the very core of all of us, but it's not a core we are always very comfortable with.

Jesus healed the man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. Or, to put it more accurately, relationship with Jesus *transformed* the man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. Jesus could have done lots of things in this encounter. He could have picked up the man and carried him into the pool himself. He could have asked one of the others who were there as bystanders to help the man. He could have shamed the crowd by expressing his horror that in all that time, nobody had helped this poor man. But Jesus is not one who offers bandaids. He doesn't see a wound and then cover it up with gauze and adhesive tape. He doesn't give out crutches and say, "well, at least now you might be able to move a little bit better." No, Jesus' power is transformative power.

We hear in the scripture text that Jesus simply "knew" the man's condition. He saw deeply into the man's heart and being. He knew what the man most needed. Not to walk. Not to be healed of his paralysis. But to be healed of his paralysis of self-sufficiency. To be made well. To know that it was not only ok but imperative to ask for help.

