

Scripture: John 5:1-9
Amazing Grace
Delivered May 9, 2010

My New Testament seminary professor, Sharon Ringe, once said that reading the book of John is kind of like peeling an onion. That is, you study a scripture passage in John until you think you know it inside and out, but behold, just under the surface another understanding awaits. So, you patiently study this second layer of onion until you think you know it inside and out, but behold, there's another daggone layer under that one. I thought about Sharon's analogy this week, as I studied this passage about the man who is healed at the pool of Bethzatha. See if like me, you don't see several layers to this story.

To understand this story at all definitely requires that we know something about Roman and Jewish cultures, their history and even a little geography. To get us started, I've included an insert in your bulletin of what the pools of Bethzatha probably looked like. They are first mentioned in the Bible way back in 2nd Kings in the Old Testament. They are mentioned again in the Book of Isaiah—so they were part of the Judean landscape for a millennia or so before Jesus arrived on the scene.

In the 1st Century BC, the pools became part of a healing sanctuary referred to in Greek as an asclepeion. Asclepieons or is that Asclepia? were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. This one was situated just outside Jerusalem's city walls—you can actually see the wall of the city of Jerusalem in the background of the insert. It is doubtful that the Jews would have allowed the Roman healing sanctuary inside the city proper. Asclepius to whom the asclepion was dedicated and from whom asclepia derive their name, was the Roman God of healing.

As you can see from your bulletin insert, the Romans constructed porticos around each pool, which was part of the asclepion. Sick people lay under the roofs of the porticos—shelters for sun and rain. They lay or sat there waiting for the water in the pools to stir. According to legend, if you so much as touched the water when it stirred, you would be healed.

Don't you think it odd that Jesus would visit a Roman asclepion? Why would he do that? It appears, at first glance that what we have here is a showdown between Jesus and Asclepius. Two gods are in a contest to determine who is able to out-heal whom! The clear winner is Jesus! Jesus cures the sick person in the blink of an eye, something that Asclepius had been unable to accomplish in 38 years!

That is the first layer of our onion. This story is a polemic against Roman mythology.

However, there is much, much more to this story. If that's all there was, then it would not have had the staying power it has had through the centuries. Bible stories—

especially the Bible stories in the Book of John, are way more than one onion skin deep. To find out what is at the heart of this story we need to look to the protagonist.

The text doesn't tell us a whole lot about him. All we know for sure is that he has been lying or sitting beside the two pools for 38 years, or according to my math, 13,870 days. That's a long time. If he was a young boy when he first came to the pools, now he is middle aged. Or, if he first came to the pools as a young man, now he is approaching old age. During that incredibly long time, sitting at the pools, this man has been incredibly patient. In all those 13,870 days, never once has he been able to connect with the water in the pool when it stirs and thus be healed, and yet he's still there.

I'm not very patient myself. I don't like standing in line at the grocery, for instance. I try to go to the grocery at off hours—late in the evening or on Friday mornings. I wait until I'm coming to Covesville to buy my stamps because I don't have to stand in line at the Covesville Post Office the way I have to at the Charlottesville Post Office. I don't know what kind of sickness our protagonist had, but if I were he, I'm certain I would have found a way, over the course of **38 years**, to connect with the healing waters of the asclepion. I would have asked or begged every family member, friend, or stranger for help to get me to the water. If I had money, I would have paid someone to take me there. Maybe I would have cut a deal with one of my fellow sufferers—I'll help you down to the water this time, you help me down to the water next time. **Something.**

I don't think I'm too different than most people. Aren't we by nature impatient? Jesus' question to the man, then, under the circumstances, is right on the mark. "Do you WANT to be made well?" The man doesn't answer the question. What does he do instead? He makes excuses. He's a whiner. "Everybody keeps getting in my way, Jesus."

Although John doesn't out and out tell us about this man, he has dropped plenty of clues besides his whininess, that speak to his character--or perhaps lack thereof. Did you notice that he never thanks Jesus, for curing him of an ailment that has cost him 38 years of his life? In fact, when he is reprimanded by the authorities for carrying his mat on the Sabbath—he turns right around and BLAMES Jesus for the infraction. Still later, when the man discovers Jesus' name, he turns that name into the authorities. John tells us that it was after this man's testimony that the Jewish authorities began persecuting Jesus. That's gratitude for you!

Last year, as you know, Don Cecil was sick with pancreatic cancer—and he spent several weeks in the hospital. His roommate was a man with emphysema. In the many times I visited Don I actually never met his roommate, though. That's because when I visited Don, the roommate was never there. The reason he was never there is because smoking is prohibited at UVA hospital. Don's roommate spent most of his waking hours

outside on the sidewalk in front of the hospital, smoking cigarettes. And did I mention that this man had emphysema? Did he really WANT to get well? Don was convinced that the man's friend or relative, a frequent visitor, was stealing oxygen tanks, too. At least, oxygen tanks kept disappearing from their room to the bewilderment of UVA's hospital staff—well, I think they eventually caught on. Anyway, that's gratitude for you.

Is this, then, the person whom Jesus heals down by the pools of Bethzatha—a man like Don's roommate? Why would Jesus do that?

We are down near the heart of our onion now. I say the heart of our onion but we are also near the heart of the entire gospel of Jesus Christ. This story and the gospel itself are ultimately about the totally unmerited grace of God. If God can love a thankless, whiny, excuse for a person like the man at the pools of Bethzatha, if God can love a chainsmoking, oxygen tank thief like Don's roommate, then perhaps God can love you, and me too. That's amazing grace, isn't it?

We've still got one more layer of onion to go. You ready? This story tells us that, following in Jesus' footsteps as his disciples, we aren't merely to reserve our compassion for those who deserve it. Oh, no, that would be too easy. We are to demonstrate compassion for ALL people. As someone has said, "Jesus could teach, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' not because of who they are, but because of who you are as Jesus' disciples."

Friends, as a nation and as individuals, we have sooo not understood this message. We want to limit our efforts to helping people who are deserving of them; and according to our standards. In fact, there's a new phrase, at least I think it's a fairly new phrase—you hear it a lot: "the working poor." We use that phrase to distinguish folks who deserve our care and compassion from folks who do not. Those who don't deserve our care are "the non-working poor." In the area of health care, we make it difficult for people to qualify—that's because we want to be extra careful that people who receive health care, again, deserve it. It sounds counterintuitive, but I think Jesus is probably shaking his head in disgust at our careful machinations. Again, as Christians, we are called to offer assistance, not because of who they are, but because of who we are. How that plays out on a national scale, I haven't a clue, but the bottom line is we are each of, an instrument of God's grace—and God's grace knows no bounds.

So, we have worked our way through the entire onion. Congratulations.

I have one more tidbit of information to share with you and then I'll be done. The word Bethzatha, which believe me I have tried to avoid in every way possible in this sermon—that word actually means house of grace or House of mercy in Aramaic, Jesus' native tongue. That's a fitting name for a place of healing, certainly. However, I learned this week that in Syriac, a close cousin of Aramaic, the term can mean either House of

Grace, or House of Disgrace—. A commentator makes the point that this dual meaning may have been appropriate since an aesclepion may have been considered disgraceful due to the presence of invalids. Bethzatha was located outside Jerusalem's walls and definitely outside the temple walls. You don't want disgraceful people getting too close to a house of worship! However, as a church, like it or not, we are actually called to be Bethzatha, in both senses of the word, aren't we? Much as we may try to be deserving, actually none of us is ever totally deserving of God's grace. And yet we are. Praise be to God! Let all the people say, Amen