

“At the Pool of Grace and Disgrace”  
John 5: 1-9

May 9, 2010, Mother’s Day

#### SCRIPTURE INTRO

- Today’s scripture takes us to an ancient hospital. At the Sheep Gate entrance to Jerusalem there are a series of porticoes with two pools, one dedicated to the Roman goddess of Fortune, and the other dedicated to the Greek god, Asklepiion, who is the god of healing.
- It is a foreign presence in the holy city. But when you’re sick, if healing is offered, you go where you have a chance of getting well. So sick people would be gathered at the pool
- The way it worked is that there would be a moment when the waters stirred, and you needed to get into the water at that moment- if you look in your bibles, you’ll see a lengthy footnote that lists a later addition to the text, saying that God sent an angel to stir the water – This appears to be a Jewish explanation for the water being stirred- that makes it more “kosher” so to speak, to seek healing in the pool of a Greek god.
- but the point WE need to know, in order to understand the SCRIPTURE, is that only ONE person got healed when the water was stirred- the FIRST person to get into the pool.
- The second thing that’s helpful to understand is the Hebrew NAME of the pool, Bethesda. Beth-hesda-means “house of grace, house of mercy”. Hesda is the word used for God’s everlasting, faithful steadfast love.
- But sometimes in Hebrew, depending on the context, a word may come to mean its OPPOSITE- Beth hesda meant either house of GRACE or house of DISgrace.
- The grace obviously referred to the possibility of healing; the DISgrace referred to the sick and the diseased, lying around the pool.
- In Hebrew thinking SICKNESS was a sign of something not right in a person’s SPIRIT, a sign of SIN, a sign of being removed from God- People around the pool would be regarded as being in a state of DISgrace.

#### At the Pool of Grace and Disgrace

My friend sent me an e-mail marked urgent! It was apparently a national DISASTER- it might RAIN that night; the WIND might blow, and if I didn’t get down to High Park NOW, I would miss seeing the cherry blossoms.

She was absolutely right- that canopy of pink against the sky was magical, to see people everywhere laughing and happy, just brought a smile to my heart. I was GLAD I did not miss the opportunity.

Just ONCE a year, life around us is stirred up, there is a surge of spring, and to SEE it and to get OUT into its midst, renews our spirits. Like the pool at Bethesda, when the waters are

stirred up, when there is a moment offered for healing, for new life. And when that moment comes, we need to SEIZE it!

But when I think of that pool, it doesn't really make my heart smile. The scene is somewhat grotesque. The cry goes up- "the waters, they're moving!" Dozens, of sick and crippled people, wriggle, crawl, scramble, maybe over one another, to be the first in the water.

Who IS this god Asklepiion? That sets up a race of suffering people and declares only one may be healed!? And the one who needs it LEAST- the one who's most ABLE to get into the pool, is the one who gets healed!

Where were their community organisers? Couldn't they all have held hands, yelled 1,2, 3 and jumped in together? Fooled the god Asklepiion?

But that's not the way the world WORKS. That pool and its race of the sick is no more grotesque than the world we live in, where the rich can be HEALED because they have MEDICINE, and the vast majority of the POOR, who suffer GREATER illness because of their POVERTY, DIE of their diseases.

The pool of Bethesda truly describes the world: a pool of both grace and disgrace.

We're all there, sharing in the disgrace of being part of an unjust world, a WORLD that is sick, in the biblical sense- there is something wrong with our lives, with our SPIRIT, and so we languish at the pool of disgrace.

But it is also true that there IS grace- there ARE special moments that come our way, moments that may be SEIZED, moments that may lead to healing, to change, to new ways of living.

A crisis perhaps, when a decision must be made, and we have a chance to reassess, to review our life. Or perhaps a personal invitation- someone INVITING us to a different way, challenging us to take a step in a new direction.

Like Jesus standing before the man, who'd lain there for 38 years, challenging him with the question "do you WANT to be made well?"

And he responds, "Yes, I DO, but I have no one to help me to get into the water"...He WANTS to be made well, and he's TRIED long enough to know that THIS thing he cannot do in his own strength. He is too sick. He needs help.

Some of us may identify with him- there are things in our lives we'd love to change, but have somehow never managed to.

A hurt we've carried and cannot put down, a regret, a judgment of another, something we've never forgiven, a person with whom we've never become reconciled, an issue we've never dealt with, a dream we've never embarked on, a hope that has never materialised.

Is there something that has kept us sick in our spirit for a long time? This man who'd lain there for 38 years gives us an opportunity today to ask the question "Why? Why is it sometimes so difficult to MOVE, to LEAVE the old and embrace a new way?" Even when we need and want to?

Had our nameless sick man simply gotten USED to his sickness and he could no longer IMAGINE a different way of living?

Had he become ACCUSTOMED to lying by the pool?- - After the first shock of finding himself amidst the odour and the night groans of other sick people, perhaps he had ADAPTED.

Made FRIENDS, learned the ROUTINE of begging alms at the Sheep gate from pilgrims as they entered and left the Holy city.. It wasn't too BAD a way of life. It's FAMILIAR now. Even COMFORTABLE. No expectations. There are some payoffs in remaining there.

The dream of becoming well has receded, it's become just another a topic for conversation, something he has in common with his new buddies, rather than a real possibility to be SEIZED.

Until the moment JESUS stands before him. REMINDING him of why he is there. Reminding him of his deepest desires, his highest dreams and hopes. Is there something that WE dream of? Some better WAY of living? Some relationship that needs HEALING? Something important that we'd love to become involved in doing?

But it's remained a dream. a topic for conversation. We will address it, later, when we've finished our current project, when our children are grown, when the house is paid off.

What are the reasons WE bring for not seizing the moment? For not living NOW as we know we ought, and WANT to? what pleasures or comforts keep us where we are?

And what would we say to Jesus standing in front of us? NOW? Reminding us of our dreams, our hopes, our deep desires to do good? Reminding us why we're here on this planet- What would we SAY?

That we're afraid to leave the familiar? that we don't know who we'd BE without our FEAR, our ANGER, our UNHAPPINESS, our TURMOIL? That life without our woes seems just a tinsie boring. The way some of us may think of heaven.

Like the story of the minister who charges into a bar and grabs a man and says, "Do you want to go to heaven", "Yes", stammers the man. "Then stand over there against the wall!"

And he grabs another man and asks him the same question- "do you want to go to heaven?"- "Yes", he gasps, "Well, stand over there".

The next man he asks says "No"- "What do you mean, "no"? You don't want to go to heaven when you die?"

"Oh, when I DIE, " says the man..- I thought you were getting a group together to go NOW!"

We're maybe not in such a RUSH to get our lives in order, to become well, to leave behind our troubles. And perhaps the race into the pool was NOT such a rush after all-

Perhaps people simply made GESTURES- crawled a few yards, rolled over, raised an arm or a leg, and then turned to a neighbour saying, -“oh well, I tried. Maybe NEXT time. You too, hey? Well, it’s good to still be together.”

Maybe it was really a SLOW race- Rather like the world’s action on climate change. We make a few gestures-a windmill here, a solar roof and hybrid car, but no REAL change, no POLITICAL WILL to break our addiction to oil that economies depend on. No political will to agree on a global strategy.

The big moment that came with Copenhagen, the moment that COULD have arrested our race to destroy the planet, that MOMENT was LOST. Where was the political will? Was it lying at the pool of Bethesda, sick, and liking it too much.

That is the problem with the world. Our WILL is sick, lying at the pool of Bethesda, and liking it too much.

Jesus regularly addresses the issue of human will. Often he asks, “What do you want? Do you WANT to be made well?” This is why Jesus CAME – to TURN the hearts of human beings to the heart of God.

When our hearts, our wills, are aligned with God’s will, THEN our life unfolds in a God pleasing way. There is love, there is caring, there is justice, there is hope.

In today’s scripture we SEE this extraordinary moment of a will SHIFTING- a man CHOOSES wellness, and in the light and love of Jesus Christ he is ABLE to claim that wellness. It’s an HEROIC moment- he leaves behind the life he’s been stuck in for 38 years and RISKS a new way.

Jesus invites us all to leave behind the old and risk new ways of faithfulness. Today, as we honour MOTHERS, I think especially of MOTHER LOVE as a way of faithfulness to God..

It takes COURAGE to love with a mother’s love- To love unconditionally, to care for another’s interests before our own. We become deeply bonded with those under our care. We risk having our hearts broken in a thousand ways.

We may not all be good at mother love. We may not all have had mothers who were good at it. But we DO know, that somewhere in the courage and the risk and the self giving and acceptance that we know as mother’s love, we see there also the love of God.

And we’re ALL called to reflect this love of God in some way. Both men and women, those who’ve birthed children, and also those who’ve never given birth. It doesn’t matter WHOM we embrace with this love, only that we seize the opportunity each moment brings.

With every opportunity, Jesus stands before us asking us the question of our life: “will we choose to be made well?”, He could just as easily be saying, “will we love with all our heart?”-it would amount to the same thing.

If we were able to love in all the circumstances were called to love, we would be WELL. If we could love unconditionally, forgive over and over, accept another with all their weakness, put another’s interest’s above our own, we would be WELL, we would be WHOLE.

It is for this that Jesus comes – to turn our hearts to the heart of God, to empower us to love with the “mother” love of God.

I’ve thought a great deal lately about my ministry here at Runnymede and what has given me the greatest joy. I would say that it is to play some small part in facilitating a person’s encounter with the living Christ.

My greatest joy has been to see people, in and through the light of Christ, walking in new ways, bravely, courageously. Being reconciled with one another. Forgiving, changing the way they live, because they can no longer say, “I don’t have anyone to lift me into the water.”

They have Jesus Christ, in whose light they are able to walk. Christ is here NOW, asking each one of us “Do YOU want to be made well?” What will OUR answer be?.

To God be the praise, the honour and the glory