

John 5:1-18 (NRSV)

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” ⁷The sick man answered him, “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.” ⁸Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. ¹⁰So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” ¹¹But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” ¹²They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk?’” ¹³Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. ¹⁴Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” ¹⁵The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. ¹⁷But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” ¹⁸For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

*Last week, Jesus left Nicodemus bewildered. In today's story, Jesus defies the authority of those who claimed to interpret God's Law.
Can a man be healed in the Sabbath? And by whom?*

Jesus, meek and mild. As best I can figure, that notion must have started with someone who never actually read the four gospels. From staring down his opponents to his confrontations in the temple courtyards, it isn't hard to imagine that many of those observing Jesus from a distance would have thought him outright defiant – a disturber of the peace, not a bringer of it. As Jesus himself put it, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34).

Thus, today's story is one of many like it. He helps a person in need, often dire need, and is accused of breaking the Law of Moses. The suggested Bible readings for this week are all similar stories. In each, we meet the defiant Jesus.

A healing pool indeed!

In the Broadway musical, “Chicago,” Roxy Hart's husband is inconsequential and insignificant. In a revealing moment, he sings a lament to his invisibility:

Cellophane
Mister Cellophane
Shoulda been my name
Mister Cellophane
'Cause you can look right through me
Walk right by me
And never know I'm there...

The crippled man laying by the healing pool might as well have been made out of cellophane. As people enter and leave the pool, he is simply ignored. Surely people see him, but it is easier to simply look away than to help this man into the water. And don't imagine it is just a few folks who ignore him. Such pools were popular throughout the Mediterranean. Indeed, because the healing pool was more like the Greco-Roman cultic pools than anything Jewish, the temple authorities tolerated the pool only because it was so popular. Yet, despite the crowds, this man, crippled for longer than many people lived in the ancient world, was ignored by all.

But in strides Jesus, who sees the man and after hearing his story of neglect and adversity, tells the man to rise, pick up his mat, and walk. As always with Jesus, there is

John's Gospel

John's gospel is different! It bears little resemblance to the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Very few of the incidents in John are also found in the synoptics. John's gospel has very little in the way of ethical teachings such as we find in the Sermon on the Mount. John writes so that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (20:31). Here are a few examples of the differences.

In the synoptics, miracles are a means for Jesus to enact the reality of God's kingdom. In John's gospel, the miracles are signposts to Jesus' identity and nature.

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus' true identity is often a secret to be protected until the right time. In John's gospel, Jesus' glory is revealed from the very beginning. For example, Jesus' first miracle is the changing of water into wine. John tells us that, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." (2:11)

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus takes Peter and two disciples to the mountaintop where he is transfigured (see Matt 17:1-9). The story of the transfiguration is not found in John – perhaps because we can best think of John's Gospel as the story of one grand transfiguration, revealing Jesus' eternal divinity while never surrendering Jesus' humanity.

more here than the man's physical healing. Jesus seeks to heal the whole man -- in body, spirit, and relationship. He calls the man to repentance even as he heals him. The crippled man may be invisible to everyone else around the pool that day, but not to Jesus, not to the Messiah and Lord. No one is invisible to God.

An announcement

The now-healed man is quickly confronted by Jesus' opponents. They accuse the man of sinning by working on the Sabbath – picking up his mat and carrying it. And they demand to know who caused him to do this. Rodney Whitacre writes: "The opponents ask, *Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?* (5:12). On one level they are simply asking for his name. But on another level this question epitomizes their basic problem: nothing that Jesus does makes godly sense to them because they do not know who he is. The major question of this Gospel is *Who is this fellow?* One's answer to that question makes the difference between eternal life and death."¹

Oftentimes, the man's response is misunderstood. It is easy to read v. 15 as if the man snitched on Jesus, turning him in to the authorities demanding to know who dared to heal on the Sabbath. But, in the Greek, the man announces (*anangelo*, part of the word group from which we get "angel") to the opponents that Jesus is the healer. *Anangelo* is used four other times in the gospels, and it is always positive and significant.² Here, the man's announcement of Jesus as the healer sets up the confrontation with the Jewish leaders³ over

¹ Whitacre, R. A. (1999). *Vol. 4: John*. The IVP New Testament commentary series (121). Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press.

²from Gail O'Day's commentary on John in the *New Interpreters Bible*. This set is in the St. Andrew library.

³ John often uses "Jews" (e.g., v. 10) as shorthand for the group of Jews who oppose Jesus, the most important of which are the leaders such as the temple priests and the Pharisees. John can't mean all Jews, for Jesus and his disciples are Jews also.

the Sabbath law.

Here and elsewhere, Jesus defies the authorities of the day who insist that they know best how to interpret and administer God's law. Jesus not only sets himself up as an interpreter of the Law, but the Law-giver.

From defiance to blasphemy

When challenged near the pool about what he had done, Jesus replies, "My Father is still working, and I also am working," there by equating himself with God, which those gathered around him correctly understand. Jesus is not only breaking the Law in their eyes, he is "making himself equal to God" (v. 18). In their estimation, Jesus has moved from being defiant to being blasphemous.

It is important that we reflect on the question that permeates every inch of John's gospel: Who is Jesus? The question itself creates the needed confrontation between light and darkness that characterizes this gospel. It is through these confrontations that Jesus reveals the Father⁴ to the world. The authorities' rejection of Jesus is their rejection of God, who is fully revealed in Jesus. They see Jesus as defiant. This is the Jesus they thought they knew. And they see him as blasphemous. More about that next week.

"Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you."

What does Jesus mean by saying this to the crippled man after healing him? Is Jesus implying that the man's disability was brought on by his sins, or perhaps his parents' sins?

In a word, no. But that takes some explaining.

In the ancient world, the gods were understood to be the first cause of all events. The sun rose and set because Apollo pulled it across the sky. The harvest was bountiful when the gods were pleased but failed when they were displeased. If your ship reached its destination safely it was because one or more gods had favored your safe arrival. If your ship sunk, well, perhaps you had prayed to the wrong god or done something to make the gods unhappy with you or perhaps the gods were unhappy with someone else on your ship (read the story of Jonah to see this played out.)

It is a natural step then to the conclusion that if a person has been injured or struck by tragedy or felled by illness, they must have done something wrong to bring it on. This is the perspective of Job's friends. The reader knows that Job has done nothing wrong, that he is truly upright and blameless. Yet, his friends assume that when Job's world falls in on him, it must be because of something that he or his family did to offend God. But of course, they are wrong. All Job ever knows is that bad things simply happened to him – he did nothing to bring it on. In the end, he gets no explanation for his misfortune. And often, like Job, neither do we.

Just because misfortune befalls someone, we cannot assume that it happened because the person did something wrong. Sometimes, bad things simply happen.

So what does Jesus mean? When we sin, we engage in thoughts, words, and deeds that diminish the image of God within us. We pull away from God, giving into the darker side of ourselves. When we sin, we are not living as God created us to live. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that sin leads to bad, often tragic consequences. Consider, the so-called seven deadly sins. Who doubts that pride, gluttony, lust and the rest demand a high price from us? Jesus wants the man's healing to be whole, encompassing not only his body, but his spirit, and his relationships with God and others.

We can't assume that misfortune is the result of sin, but we can sure say that sin leads to misfortune. The equation works in one direction, but not the other.

⁴Referring to God as "Father" was standard Jewish fare. The many references to the Father are not directly Trinitarian in the way that you and I might tend to read them. When Jesus says, "The Father and I are one" (10:30) it is a claim that Jesus and God are one.

Sabbath Law

The Jews were a most peculiar people in the ancient world. First, they believed that there was only one god, when everyone else believed in many gods. The citizens of the Roman Empire devoted a good bit of energy to staying out of the way of the many capricious and unpredictable gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon.

Not only did the Jews believe that there was only one god who had made the entire cosmos, they believed that this God had chosen them. Not the influential Greeks or the powerful Romans, but this small community of Semitic people.

The Jews didn't eat what everyone else ate – no pork, no shellfish. They didn't even work like everyone else. They took off an entire day each week! From sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday not one bit of work happened among the Jews. How odd these people must have seemed to men like Pontius Pilate, sent from Rome to be the face of Caesar before the Jews.

In the eyes of the Jews, all these "peculiarities" set them apart as God's people. Sabbath, food laws, and the rest were boundary markers, badges of membership as it were, in the people of God. In a world dominated by Greco-Roman language, culture, and religion, there was always pressure on the Jews to assimilate, to be more like everyone else. In response, the Jews, led by the Pharisees, clung evermore tightly to these boundary markers, such as the keeping of the Sabbath.

All this helps us to understand the vehemence with which the Pharisees attacked Jesus over perceived Sabbath violations. The cripple in today's story had been crippled since birth – couldn't Jesus have waited a few more hours?

Jesus' hope was that the Pharisees and all the Jews would see that their fixation on these boundary markers had not led them toward God, but away from God. The problem was not with the Law of Moses, which is grounded in love of God and neighbor, but on the all-too-human tendency to fixate on the wrong things, usually the easy stuff. After all, is it easier to keep Sabbath law or to genuinely love God and neighbor?

Memory Verse of the Week

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7 NRSV

We live in anxious times, fed by a 24/7 news cycle that stokes our fears and drives us to worry about much over which we have little or no control. What can we do? How can we break the shackles of worry? Here is a bit of advice from the apostle Paul to the Christian in Philippi. These are good words to place in our hearts and carry with us each day.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

00Try to imagine yourself as one of the many people gathered around the pool. You are there for your own healing or you are there with someone you care about. The crippled man on the mat may have caught your eye and you may have felt a twinge of guilt as you looked away. Perhaps you never really saw the man at all. After all, you've got your own problems to deal with – it's why you are there. Now, try to imagine yourself witnessing the scene between the man and Jesus. Surely, this would have attracted your attention. Talk would be buzzing around the pools as people struggled to see what was happening. Or perhaps not. Might people even have missed this amazing work of God's? The story hints that might be the case. What effect do you think Jesus' healing would have had on you if you had witnessed it. Might you have thought, Why not me? Why not my loved one?

You might discuss what this story says to us about the invisible among us. How many times have you welcomed someone to worship whom you didn't recognize? Have you ever seen someone sitting alone and sat down next to them? How can we improve our ability to see the people that are too often invisible to us? Have you ever been invisible to others when you really wanted them to see you? What was it like?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, John 2:13-25 Jesus defies the temple authorities, turning over the tables of the moneychangers and disrupting the business of the temple.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Mark 2:23-28 Jesus defies the Pharisees by eating some grain plucked from the field on the Sabbath.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus defies the devil, refusing his many temptations.</p>	<p>Thursday, Luke 7:36-50 Jesus defies Simon the Pharisee in his own home, for his unwillingness to welcome a “sinner.”</p>
<p>Friday, Mark 14:53-72 Jesus defies the High Priest Caiaphas at his “trial.”</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

