

The stories that describe Jesus healing sick people are sometimes interesting not just for the medical relief that is provided, but also for the human interest aspects. They can be great lessons about the nature of both God and man, if we just look close enough.

One that I find rather disturbing, though, is found in John 5:2-9:

*Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie--the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath,*

It is wonderful the way that Jesus seeks this person out and engages him. Why did Jesus only heal that man? He could have healed them all, but it wouldn't have had the same impact. Jesus was drawn to this man because he was so helpless and formed a relationship with him.

He is apparently the sickest one there, for he has been an invalid for almost four decades. Jesus asks him a question that would seem to have such an obvious answer, "Do you want to get well?" The man did not answer him sarcastically, as I probably would have. He simply explains the reason that he has not yet been healed. It is almost as though he says, "I don't lay here because I enjoy it; I have no way to respond when the time is right." The local people believed that an angel stirred the waters to give them magical properties.

Imagine the cripple's feeling, when as he watched every day when the waters were stirred, someone with a hangnail or skin rash got into the water and apparently received the blessing or power! This man had been overlooked for many years, and suddenly someone comes up to him and asks him if he wants to be healed! Jesus simply told him to get up and go.

After healing the man, Jesus just slips away into the crowd. This is also very interesting, but it sets up a follow-up visit. Since this was the Sabbath day, the Jews were upset about the healing (and the fact that the man was so excited he was carrying around his bedroll) and questioned him about who had healed him. I bet that they would not have done this if he had been healed by the "angel".

Jesus later sought him out personally to encourage him. Jesus told him who he was, and the man reported this back to the Jews. This man was not cast out of the synagogue (as far as we know) like the man born blind, but this is a very similar scenario. We see this interaction between the man, the Jews, and Jesus as the critical conflict in this story.

But there is a deeper level that bothers me because I see such a parallel to the way things go sometimes in the present day church. Notice that the man just lay there while someone with a lesser need for healing made use of the powers of the pool. It represents sort of a "healing of the fittest", and is contrary to the message given by Christ in Matthew 9:12-13:

*On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Those who are self-righteous, like the Pharisees, he cannot help. They feel that they are the fittest, and are constantly scrambling for the best seats, for the recognition and the blessings; but they are going to be asked to go back. Christ came not to be served, but to serve (Matthew 20:28), and we should follow Him in that.

I am also reminded of the thoughts in Ezekiel 34, where the shepherds push around the sheep and the strong trample the weak. Unfortunately, this many times reflects the state of the church and the fact that we do not love each other as much as we should. I have seen the "church" choose between members struggling through a divorce, and the "fittest" one is accepted

while the “disabled” one is ignored and rejected. It also shows the way we “play” church; we have great programs, etc., but those who are really hurting are many times left outside the gate and remain unreached.

We must not think, like the Pharisees, that we are spiritually healthy and can look down on the “sick”. We must understand that we are all sinners and fall short of God’s glory. The key to remember is that we do not fall short of God’s grace. As Paul Miller says, “Jesus is drawn to people who are in the low place. He loves those at the bottom.” He is the master teacher who does not just concentrate on the good students, but on those who are struggling.

© 2005 Heard Lowry. All rights reserved.