

6th Sunday of Easter (C), John 5: 1-9

Prayer & the Imagination of God

- When Lynette and I traveled to Israel with a number of other pilgrims from our church in the Hague, I found out that the Holy Land was not only a land of history and legends, it also had accumulated 4,000 years of superstitious beliefs,
 - and, at every Christian site we visited our guide, a Jewish immigrant from the Netherlands, was surprised to discover that we Christians didn't know any of the amazing cures and miracles that were readily available at the places we visited, if only we would perform the right ritual
 - Like placing our hand inside the hole of the grotto floor of the Church of the Nativity, right over the spot where Jesus was born, and by doing that God would grant us whatever we wished.
- Apparently, our guide was convinced that Christianity was a religion of superstitions, and his mission in life was to improve our woefully inadequate knowledge about Christian beliefs.
- Today's superstitions are just a reflection of the many superstitions that existed at the time of Jesus in Jerusalem, one of which we find in today's reading from John.
 - Today's reading is set at the pool with five porticoes, near the Sheep Gate (now the current Eastern Gate of the Old City of Jerusalem).
 - That site has been excavated, and numerous pagan healing shrines were found in its vicinity,
 - And the story about the pool that we heard about in today's reading might have been one of those healing shrines.
- So here we have Jesus walking by all these invalids who were surrounding this pool,
 - And these invalids believed that if only they could be in the water when it was stirred up ("by an angel" the ancient superscription reads), one could control the actions of God, and he would have no choice but to cure you of your ills.
- Jesus asks one of the long-term invalids what seems to be a very stupid question, but it turns out to be exactly the right question: "Do you wished to be made well?"
 - Now in today's world, if Jesus would have texted that question to the invalid, the response he would probably have received (cause you gotta keep texts short) was "Doh."

- Or, in other words, “What do you think I’ve been here for 38 years?”
- But the question revealed a more complex problem.
 - This invalid’s answer reveals, not how he hopes that God will answer his prayers for healing, but, instead, the invalid gives all the reasons why he is firmly convinced that God will never be able to help him. (...”While I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”)
- This invalid sees only two solutions to his problems:
 - Either he gets to the pool first, and God will be forced to cure him,
 - Or, God should send down a Heavenly Brute Squad, who will gather the invalid up, push aside all the other invalids and gently place him in the pool first.
- These are the two bookends of the invalid’s beliefs, (superstition / Brute Squad)
 - And within those two bookends, the invalid lies on his pallet in despair, knowing full well that God will not answer his prayer.
- But Jesus will have none of that.
 - He rejects the *superstition* that God will be forced to provide a cure to the first person in the pool, and he rejects the *despair* of the invalid.
- Instead Jesus gives a third way, an unexpected way, a way that was beyond the imagination of the invalid: “Just stand up, take up your mat, and walk.”
 - And had the invalid followed the pattern of his 38 years by the pool, he would have given a litany of reasons why he couldn’t stand up.
 - But instead, he, in turn, did the unexpected. He actually followed the command of Jesus and stood up.
- Here, then, in probably these shortest gospel reading we’ve had since Easter, we find what I consider to be a most succinct and encouraging understanding of the meaning of Prayer.
- The invalid understood prayer in two ways:
 - in one, God would be forced to act in a prescribed way,
 - in the other, God should be obliged to respond so the outcome occurs the way we want it to occur.
- I’ve actively lived in both of these world of prayer.

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- I got a flashback to the first, the way of “making God act” in a little prayer card I found inside a “Pocket Manual of Prayer” that turned up at the Kiwanis Shop.
 - Inside was a little card with this prayer published by the “Crusade for the Rescue and Preservation of the Holy Shrines in Palestine.”
 - Mini-Prayer: “Blessed be the holy and immaculate conception of the most-blessed Mary, mother of God.” (Indulgence, 300 days)
 - Which for me, in many people’s understanding pre-vatican II theology meant that if I said this prayer, God would be obliged to grant a partial indulgence of the temporal punishment due to sin and grant a pardon of 300 days off of the sentence I would have had in Purgatory.
 - This is a conception of Purgatory that has been dropped by the Catholic Church...and we’re discussing some of this on the margins of the Faith Formation Class’ study of N.T. Wright’s book, *Surprised by Hope*.
- In any event,
 - I can see the basis for this belief in indulgences:
 - “...”whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven...”
 - But still, my (probably misunderstood) understanding of indulgences seems like a prayer to a God, who is a judge bound by a book entitled, *Mandatory Time Off for Good Behavior*
- The second mode of prayer referred to in this Gospel reading goes like this: “Wouldn’t it be nice if God were to provide a way for me to be first in line at the pool?”
 - To which the reply of Jesus was; “ I’ve got a better solution. Just stand up and walk.”
- My prayers are also often like this:
 - “Wouldn’t it be nice, dear God, if you would enable me to have a winning lottery ticket and save us the time spent in raising funds for a homeless shelter?”
 - To which God’s response is, “Forget about that.”
 - “Wouldn’t it be nicer to form a coalition of those whose hearts reach out to the homeless and destitute, and let everyone share in the experience of providing a shelter for homeless families?”

- You see, this points to at least three things I can take away from this story about the invalid and the pool:
 - 1. God's imagination is much larger than mine
 - 2. We have a choice
 - 3. What about unanswered prayer?
- 1. God's imagination:
 - In providing that third way (the way of taking up his pallet and walking), the answer that Jesus provided was far beyond the pale of what the invalid thought was a viable alternative
 - Essentially, Jesus is saying that God is bigger than your imagination.
 - God can give you new freedoms of choice, new possibilities of life that you had never before believed to be possible.
- 2. We have a choice:
 - Jesus gave the invalid a choice to live in his despair or to do something completely unexpected
 - In response to Jesus' command to stand up and walk, the invalid did just that.
 - But at the same time, he could have remained true to his nature, which was one of despair and defeatism, and he could have vetoed Jesus' answer to his prayers.
 - The invalid could have responded to the command of Jesus, by saying, "No, I'd rather not stand up: I don't think my legs will support me after 38 years of not using them."
 - You see, God gives us, in his surprising answers to our prayers, a full measure of our freedom: we have the choice to veto God's answer to our prayers.
- 3. And that Veto of God's answer may be a large part of what unanswered prayer is:
 - It's not so much that God has not answered my prayers;
 - it's that I have rejected God's answer.
 - Particularly when God's answer is not something I expected.
- In other words, when Jesus says to me, "Stand up; take up your pallet and walk,"

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- He is saying, “Here, use this new opportunity, which you could not have created with your own limited imagination.”
- A number of years ago Christ Church was offered the opportunity to purchase the building which now houses the Gentry House.
 - At that time, Christ Episcopal Church collectively asked, “Shall we buy this building and use it to expand our church sanctuary?”
 - The answer we got then, was “No.”
 - It was a prayer that was unanswered in the way we thought it should be answered.
 - But the real answer to the prayer was, instead, “Here is something bigger than you thought. How about Respite Care for Adults?”
 - We had a choice. We could have said no.
 - But we heeded that answer to prayer, picked up our mats and walked.
- On Sunday, the 1st of May, we will have another opportunity to ask God about another property, about our mission and vision.
 - And I have no fears about the outcome of this conversation
 - Because as a church gathered in prayer about this matter,
 - not only will we be praying to Christ, we will be praying with Him
 - And I am fully convinced that in that way, our interests and talents will be directed in new creative ways (that we never imagined)
 - And that new pathways will be opened up in our church and in our community for the flow of divine action.
 - And I pray for this to happen through the power of the almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.