

“Resistance to Healing Grace”

**Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, May 1, 2016
Sixth Sunday of Easter**

Readings from Scripture: Revelation 21:10, 22-26; 22:1-5 and John 5:1-18

And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day--and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Revelation 21:10, 22-26; 22:1-5

Before I read the scripture this morning, I do want to take this opportunity to thank Karen and David and all the members of this church staff for their very gracious and warm welcome of me into the life of this church, and also to all of you for your gracious welcome for my wife, Susie and myself into the life of this church. We've been here a year and a half and we look forward to many years in the life of this church.

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

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids--blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When 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?" The 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." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, "It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." But he answered them, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take it up and walk'?" Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later 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." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But

Jesus answered them “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” For 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.

John 5:1-18

Will you pray with me? Gracious and living God, may we be aware of the stirring of your spirit in our midst. May that same spirit stir within us, opening us to your word and to your way. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

So much is happening in these 18 verses that we find in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John, meaning found at many different levels which is typical of John's Gospel. Jesus is in Jerusalem for a festival and he encounters a man who has been ill for 38 years--encounters him at a pool called Bethzatha, living amongst the blind, the lame and the paralyzed. We don't know the exact nature of his disease, only that he is ill and he is lying beside this pool. This pool where it was believed that an angel of the Lord came down at certain seasons and stirred up the waters and then the first one who stepped into these stirred up waters was made well, or so it was believed. "Do you want to be made well?", Jesus inquired of this man. Now notice in that question Jesus treats this man with a certain kind of respect and a dignity, not presuming to know what this man wanted. Maybe he just wanted to be left alone. Maybe he was afraid of rejection, once again. Or maybe he was afraid that he was going to get another lecture on the law, about how he must have done something, some kind of sin, to merit his present circumstance for it was assumed, you see, in that time that disease of any kind was punishment for sin. So somehow it was his fault.

So when the man responded to Jesus telling him why he was not cured--there was no one there to put him in the water, of course not, because to touch him would make one unclean. But even so when he tried to make his way to the pool someone else would step in front of him and get there first. All of these could have been believable reasons or maybe excuses. But Jesus bypasses all of this and simply said to him, "Stand up, take up your mat and walk."

Now I realize you are 21st century people, I am as well, sort of. But may I ask you at this point to set aside for just a bit your 21st century Newtonian physics-filled mind, your growing skepticism about this kind of healing although there must be something in there to explain all of this. To Jesus' first listeners and the gospel writers, the healing itself was not so much the point at all of this story, or necessarily remarkable to them. Others did it. The main focus of the story, you see, is what follows the healing. Jesus had healed on the sabbath. That was against any common interpretation or accepted interpretation of the law and it inspired a fierce resistance. Not only that but there was little or no recognition on Jesus' part, apparently, that this man was, after all, unclean and somewhat outcast because of his disease. Thus the story ends with this resolve, you see, of the religious leaders of his time to somehow do away with him, this upstart and blaspheming--he equaled himself to God, after all--blaspheming rabbi. There was resistance--a fierce resistance--to healing grace.

What of us? What about our resistance to healing grace? Sometimes our resistance is very, very personal. I am sure there was some very personal inner resistance on the part of this man in the story as well. Perhaps his reasons or excuses would make him go away. But we also resist--resist healing grace sometimes because of secret shame, inner shame, sometimes because of growing cynicism within us. Sometimes we simply don't feel worthy, having been disappointed so many times in our life--we don't want one more. We don't want to risk it. Other times the resistance to healing grace in our time is social, imposed, societal--when being classified or grouped--sometimes being classified as some kind of sinner or outcast for one reason or the other.

The Rev. Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor who served a church in the South Bronx area of New York City which is one of the poorest neighborhoods in our country. She served the church from 1984 until 2003 and she wrote a book entitled "Breathing Space" which chronicled her experiences in the life of this church, Transfiguration Lutheran Church. In that book she tells the story of a woman named Angie. If there was ever a candidate for healing grace and compassion, Angie was it. When Rev. Neumark met Angie, Angie was in a deep, deep depression, depression brought about, first of all, by sexual abuse as a child, and then by wasted years of taking every kind of drug she could get ahold of to numb the pain. And depression because of all of that and because she was HIV positive. She did have a son and one summer she decided she would send her son to the summer program at Transfiguration Lutheran Church, at Heidi Neumark's church, in reality just to get him out of the house so she could lie on the couch uninterrupted in her depression, no energy to hardly do anything and she resisted fiercely any attempt to help ...and societal social resistance, HIV positive...we know what that has meant at times in our history. But her son came home from the summer program and he was all excited. He started nagging his mother because he wanted to be baptized. He'd asked to be baptized at the church and he wanted to be baptized and there was something deep inside of her that wanted that as well, but her son's request set off repeated visits by Rev. Neumark and other church members and she fiercely resisted their offers for help. But slowly, slowly her resistance began to break down.

Angie finally stood up off of that couch. She finally stood up and very tentatively went inside the walls of the church, first to see her son baptized but then afterwards as well, hovering in the back, leaving as soon as it was over. But then eventually coaxed into the body of the congregation, then invited to join the Bible study group, which she did. And then volunteering to serve in the homeless ministry of that church. Slowly beginning to walk. Finally then making a decision to join the church. Standing up, taking up her mat. Baby steps.

Eventually because all of this began to awaken within her this high intelligence that she innately had and didn't realize it, she enrolled in a two-year Lutheran Christian Leadership class called Diaconia. She was, don't you see, underneath all of that depression and underneath all of those years of abuse, a highly intelligent woman and was now absorbing all of this with growing excitement. Now everyone in the class was required at some point to give a presentation to the others on Lutheran theology. Go figure. Specifically, telling why you were Lutheran. One night those who were slated to present were conveniently absent. So the teacher looked at the group and said was anyone willing to step in. Well, I think you can imagine--all eyes went down, everyone avoiding the eyes of the teacher--all except Angie. She didn't have her paper, she didn't have her stuff like the rest of them, but she was prepared. She stood up and she got a glass of water. She slowly opened a Mary Kay jewelry case with a little pink pouch in it that was filled with multicolored pills. She took out ten of the pills and before the class, silently, one by one she took each pill. The class was riveted by this unusual theological presentation. When the last pill was swallowed, Angie looked at them and she said, "That is my HIV medication. I'm Lutheran because this church welcomed me as I am, an HIV-positive, recovering addict and a child of God filled with grace. Taking care of my health," she went on to say, "is my stewardship. Now by the grace of God I want to live. I want to live for my son. I want to live for all of those people out there on the streets like I was. I want to live because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me. It is not just my body anymore. I'm part of his body, a temple of the Holy Spirit." And then this budding Lutheran theologian sat down.

Indeed. Angie stood up in every way I know, took up her mat and walked. Perhaps you might say she even ran. So where do you fit in this healing story? Perhaps you know someone who is in need of God's grace, compassion and healing, and you are called to extend a hand of encouragement, a hand of grace. Or perhaps you, yourself, are in need of God's healing grace for one reason or another, grief, secret shame, cynicism, a broken relationship. The truth is probably most of us are a mixture of both. And Jesus' words echo down through the ages to us, "Stand up, take up your mat and walk." Amen.