

THERE'S HOPE FOR THE OBTUSE

John 5:2-9a

Sermon presented by The Rev. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church,
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Today's passage reports Jesus healing the man at the pool. All the healing stories in the Gospels teach something of first importance about the character and work of Jesus Christ. But Jesus' healings often teach a thing or two, as well, about the one being healed. For example:

+ When blind Bartimaeus' sight was restored (Mark 10:46-52), he began at once to follow Jesus; and we see that we ought to follow Jesus, as well, for he has also given us vision and hope.

+ When a man suffering from a dreaded skin disease was cured, he enthusiastically charged forth, telling everyone what had happened (Mark 1:40-45); and we see that we ought to declare the wonders of God's love, as well, for he has also given us new life, filled with gratitude and joy.

+ When a woman afflicted for years with severe internal bleeding was made well, and Jesus said to her, "Your faith has made you well," (Matt. 9:18-22); we see that we ought to have such faith, as well, for he has also given us cause to trust him whole-heartedly.

In this instance, though, there's nothing about the person Jesus healed at the pool that attracts our admiration. He's not a role model. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown calls him "obtuse," writing: "In his obtuseness this man . . . could almost be amusing," if his "malady were not so tragic." Obtuse means dense, dim, dull, slow to learn or understand, lacking in insight or discernment. Hm . . . so maybe there's something important to be learned from him, after all. There's hope even for the obtuse! And for some of us, that's Good News, very Good News, indeed!

We may not think of ourselves as obtuse, of course, nor should we. Each one of us is knowledgeable and capable in regard to a great many things, and appropriately confident. There are important aspects of life, however, when obtuseness takes over. We may see in this fellow by the pool some characteristics suggestive of our own.

I'll mention three things.

First: he seems to have become indifferent to his own situation. It is written that "When Jesus saw him lying there . . . he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'" Sickness is certainly not "all in the mind," of course. And yet there lurks in many of us such a weary, discouraged spirit that the will to be well is no more. Bystanders overhearing this exchange might have thought Jesus a bit crazy, or even harsh. Why would he even think to ask a ailing person if he wants to be well? Of course he wants to be well! Well, maybe, maybe not. Jesus is more concerned with a paralysis of the spirit than a paralysis of the legs. And, seeing the man lying there, Jesus first thought was that his primary disability is on the inside, not the outside.

It's easy to lose heart and surrender to weary resignation, sighing that things are the way they are and can't be changed, so "what's the use?" On Mothers Day I call to mind one of the

greatest mothers of all, television's Marge Simpson, who somehow keeps her dysfunctional family functioning. But even Marge has moments of discouragement. In one episode Homer says to her: "Sometimes I think we're the worst family in town." And Marge has this great response; she says: "Maybe we should move to a larger community." In other words, there's no point trying to make things better. Let's go someplace where there may be some family even worse, or at least we'll be less likely to draw attention to ourselves.

"Do you want to be made well?" Jesus asked the man. Do you want be changed? Do you? Do we?

Second: in response to this question, "do you want to be made well?", the fellow complains to Jesus that there's no one willing to help him into the pool, which supposedly contained healing waters, and others keep pushing in front of him, it's their fault. Scripture doesn't invite us to psychoanalyze Biblical characters of whom we know little, and yet it's hard to shake-off the impression that he must be a disagreeable fellow, that no one would ever help him. We may contrast his experience with that of another paralyzed man in Scripture, whose friends so cared for him and about him that (remember?) they hauled him on a cot, up a ladder to the flat roof of a house where Jesus was staying, sawed-open a hole in the roof, and lowered their friend on the cot to come before Jesus. Sometimes in life we need a friend and one can't be found. But it's implausible to suppose that he was never helped. And his blaming others for his predicament is almost a spot-on definition of obtuseness.

Raymond Brown wrote of this fellow: "His crochety grumbling about [those] who outrace him to the water betrays a chronic inability to seize opportunity."

And popular motivation speaker and author Wayne Dyer observes:

All blame is a waste of time. No matter how much fault you find with another, and regardless of how much you blame another, it will not change you. The only thing blame does is to keep the focus off you when you are looking for external reasons to explain your unhappiness or frustration.

Finally, we can't help but notice about the man lying at the pool, that when Jesus healed him, he got-up and left. No sense of awe and wonder. No resolve to follow. No mention of faith. No word of thanks. He didn't even ask who Jesus was. He exhibits no awareness at all of how and from whom blessings flow.

I was walking in a cemetery once, years ago, and I came across a gravestone on which was inscribed: "John Jones" – (I'm making up the name, I don't recall what the name actually was) – "John Jones . . . who always did unto others as they did unto him." Now, I'm guessing that John's family meant to say that he lived by the "Golden Rule," and somehow the words got mixed-up, and once the stone was engraved it was too expensive to change. But I've also wondered, I can't help but wondering, if maybe, just maybe, the stone says exactly what they

meant it to say; that old John had no sense at all of grace or gratitude, no awareness of the giftedness and blessedness of life. If so, he might be a little bit like the fellow in today's Bible story. And maybe a little bit like us, as well, like you and me, if we're honest with ourselves about ourselves.

Turning our attention now to Jesus Christ, who is, after all, the featured character in this story. Every step of the way Jesus takes the initiative. All the good verbs here occur in relation to him. Jesus *saw* the man. Jesus *knew* he needed help. Jesus *spoke* to him. "*Stand up, take up your mat, and walk,*" Jesus said.

Here's the astonishing good news taught and transmitted by this passage: Jesus' excellence is not limited by our human mediocrity. Although we may feel that faith is the prerequisite for God's love, here Jesus looks with grace and favor upon one who seems undeserving of either. But in Christ there is love even for those who are indifferent or disinterested. In Christ there is help even for the self-centered. In Christ there is hope even for the obtuse. It's not like if we stop being obtuse then God, impressed by the change He sees in us, will love us. God doesn't seek value but creates it. All thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord!