

How quickly everything can change. It hadn't seemed like much at the time, he'd just been standing at his workbench when his right knee had just come out from under him altogether. He stood up and dusted himself off and went back to his work. He forgot all about that odd fall until about two weeks later, it happened again. This time it hurt, a deep aching pain right down to the bone. He'd spent the rest of the afternoon with it elevated. Three days later he had another episode. This time the pain lasted all afternoon, radiating out into the muscles of his hips and lower back. He went to see the doctor. His physician was perplexed. "You know, you are too young for me to think this is arthritis, you are too active for it to be a blood clot. I just don't know what it is. Sometimes these things come on and go away just as quickly. I can refer you to a specialist, but really, you'll just be paying for his new camel, and He won't be able to tell you anything new. I'd say wait it out, put a cold compress on the affected area and come see me if it keeps happening."

So that's what he did. He learned to ignore the pain that wouldn't go away some days and worked through it. He learned to rest his weight on his good leg and favored the bad one. Then the good leg started hurting. His mother worried about him, encouraged him to go on and see the specialist anyway, but he resisted. "It's just a waste of time, mom, they won't tell me anything, and besides, I can still work."

About three months into to it, though he couldn't ignore it anymore...He woke up one morning and started to get out of bed and before he could collect his wits about him, he was in the floor. Something was different though. The pain was gone. For that matter, so was all feeling from the waist down. Nothing. He struggled mightily to get to his feet,

only to crumble back to the floor. Time and time again until, exhausted, he lay there and wept tears of fear.

That afternoon his father took him back to the doctor. He waited patiently as the doctor pricked each of his toes with pins seeking any hint of feeling. Nothing. “well, there is just nothing I can do. I’m a GP. You need someone who specializes in paralysis.

There’s nobody in Jerusalem that heals this sort of disease. There are some folks in Rome that I’ve heard about through the grapevine that work with patients with your sort of problem, but I have to tell you, I can’t see any physical reason for your disability. In fact, I believe you may need to see the priest instead. Have you been leading a clean life?”

So he went home again. He couldn’t work, he couldn’t even get himself up and down the stairs. His wedding had to be postponed. At first they called it postponement, at least. After a year, his fiancée sent her uncle to meet with his and they reached an agreement. “Surely the family couldn’t expect her to tie herself to someone who had no prospect of supporting her, who was clearly not living right. Would they please just return the dowry, no hard feelings, no one will ever mention it again?”

So there he was, all washed up and not even twenty.

He found ways to pass the time, for a while. There’s only so much solitaire you can play before it just becomes meaningless. The endless days stretched out before him, otherwise healthy but unable to perform the simplest tasks that required walking. That’s when he heard about the pool at Beth Zatha. Some folks had been healed there. It seems that when the angel came and stirred the water the first person in could expect miraculous healing, as the spiritual woes that led to a physical manifestation were taken away in the

bubbling pool. So, bereft of any other hope, he had himself carried down to the waterfront. I suppose it must have been a hassle for his brother to carry him down every morning, but when there's nothing left but a glimmer of hope, really, who can deny that to the poor guy?

Thirty-eight years went by. Thirty-eight years of dragging his pallet down to the waters edge. Thirty-eight years of smelling the smells of death and sickness every day. He watched his fellow sufferers come and go, some dying, some giving up hope. He was an old man now. His muscles withered away, it was just skin on bone where his legs were concerned. For thirty-eight years he waited, hoping for once to be the first one in the pool when the water stirred. Once he thought he had succeeded...he had seen the water start to move and he had flopped off the wall, plunging into the cold water only to find the cruel reality that it had only been the wind stirring the waters. He and the more crippled misfortunates were rarely the first ones in the pool when the water started to stir...usually it was just some jerk with a hangnail who pushed past everyone to make a cannonball into the water, soaking everyone in a ten foot radius and declaring "I'm healed," only to mock those in real pain. Anyone who needed healing could never get to the water in time. It was a caustic cycle, breeding cynicism from those who waited year after year for the promised cure. The pool promised mercy to the adequate and sufficient, holding its treasure elusively from those who most needed it, the ones with extreme need. Like grace held just out of reach, the promised wholeness remained elusive to him, to the lepers who came seeking cleanness and the blind seeking sight, the women made unclean by hemorrhages and deaf and the mute. It was a motley assortment to pass ones life among, waiting by the water's edge. But then, what else could he do?

His life had passed at the water's edge, waiting for mercy that was always out of his grasp.

One Friday afternoon, he watched with a sinking heart as the sun set and his brother had not come to collect him and carry him home. With the setting of the sun, it became the Sabbath, and his brother could not carry him- no one could carry him, or carry food to him, it would be work, and work was strictly prohibited on the Sabbath, as the Law commanded, Honor the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy. He must spend the night at the pool, and the next day, and after sundown, perhaps his brother would fetch him home. To make it worse, it was a festival day and the crowd of pilgrims would make it all the more unbearable. Not only must he lie on his mat, there would be shuffling feet kicking up dust that would fill his mouth and cloud his sight, and no one would bring him water. That would be work, and the law forbade it.

He had lain there almost all day when the man asked an almost mocking question: "do you want to be made well?"

He paused and bit his tongue fighting back the sarcastic response that jumped to mind, "no. I've lain here thirty-eight years for no good reason. I like being surrounded by the people that society has forgotten. No, I'd just as soon lie here until I die." No, this time, he bit his tongue and answered, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool. When the water is stirred, someone always jumps ahead of me."

"Stand up, take your mat and walk."

For a moment, his emotions swirled as he pondered the command...Do I give him the satisfaction of watching a lame man try to walk? Is it just a cheap laugh at my expense?

Somewhere within him, the urge came to stand up and walk. Maybe just one more try...He took up his mat and walked.

He took up his mat and walked. John gives it no more than one line. He took up his mat and walked.

That's when he was arrested.

They wanted to know who told him to take up his mat and walk, and he looked around and the man was gone, disappeared into the crowds that waited by the water's edge. "I don't know..." he stammered.

For the first time in thirty-eight years he could live as a whole person...a normal person. The enormity of it welled up in him...what to do, where to go, he wanted to take it all in, to drink in the freedom because it had been so long, he had waited so long, he had wanted so much, and after all, it might come back...Grace happened so fast, it could be taken away just as fast.

It was Sabbath so he went to temple. As he was in the crush of people, the man came up once more, and said to him "you have been made well, sin no more so that worse will not happen to you."

They wanted to know who told him to take up his mat and walk and so he told them. It was Jesus.

In the blink of an eye, John's focus changes 180 degrees to Jesus.

Jesus was in the temple with the leaders entrusted with right keeping of the Law. And the law had been violated. From a certain point of view, their question might seem valid, "Why is he doing such things on the Sabbath? God gave us the Law, and the Law is

clear. And besides that, this man has waited thirty-eight years, what is a few more hours?

This is just breaking the law for the sake of breaking the law!

“My father is still working and I also am working.”

Jesus could have made a number of responses and he would have been right. He might have relied upon humanitarian exceptions contained within the Law had provisions for certain extenuating circumstances...If your ox fell in the ditch and it would be harmful to leave it there, then you could work on the Sabbath to extract it...Jesus could avoid the charge of blasphemy by relying on the exceptions to the rule...he might find a loophole and placate the religious authorities.

But that’s not the direction Jesus goes. “My father is still working, and I also am working.” This is an answer designed flatly and deliberately to stand in the face of injustice.

In other words, this man who has waited thirty-eight years and happens to be healed on the wrong day is not to be denied God’s grace to suit anyone’s misunderstanding of how God works.

The leaders had become so hung up on the nuances and subtleties of what the behavior was prescribed by the Law that without even realizing it, they had come to believe that the Law, which said what people should and should not do, in fact said what God could and could not do. The Law is the Law and that is how God works.

And along comes this teacher who says instead, “I will not wait even one more minute to give the grace that God gives. You want me to delay just a little bit, but no, not a second longer. God is acting now.”

If there were someone who could boast in his works, it would be my great-uncle Tony. He gave generously of his financial resources, which were considerable. He gave generously of his time as the Chairman of the Board for the homeless shelter of the city in which he lived. He loved his wife and children and doted on his grandchild. In spite of all of this, for years he lived a life riddled by uncertainty. My great-grandfather a formidable man with a domineering personality driven by a deeply held faith pushed all his children unmercifully, instilling in them a constant feeling of inadequacy. His god was not merciful and therefore he was not worthy. Having been taught that he could never be worthy enough or good enough, Uncle Tony turned his back on the church and on God. At his funeral, the preacher told this story of early years bereft of grace. But, the preacher went on to say, the story did not end with the Law and fear and a constant nagging sense of unworthiness. No, at the age of sixty-seven, after a lifelong journey towards grace that must surely have felt like waiting thirty-eight years beside a pool unable to get in, after all those years, the man was baptized and joined the church, spending his waning years abundantly aware that the God who had blessed him had loved him and reached out when he was unable to reach.

God's grace can change things in an instant. Or it can take a lifetime. But God's grace will not be deterred.

And this morning as we prepare to come to the table, Jesus tells us yet again, if we are waiting by the water's edge, that the one who has loved us and provided for us, will settle for nothing less than the very grace of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.