

Sermon – May 22, 2022
Pastor Dan Hollis
John 5:1-9

Today's Scripture reading is all about people getting in the way of God's work. In fact, the *whole* of John chapter 5 is inspired by different people getting in the way of God's work in different ways.

I like to think that all of us are too focused on *doing* God's work to get in the *way* of it, but *none* of us are perfect. So I'm going to spend some time today talking about *doing* God's work, and about getting in the *way* of God's work. And hopefully we all can get better at doing *one*... and *worse* at doing the other.

When I read this passage from the Gospel of John, I find two questions bubble up inside me—one that the story asks, and one that I think comes next. **The first question is, “Who does Jesus want me to help?” and the second: “What power do I have to do it?”**

I'll address the first question first because today's reading is a *great* place to *start* trying to answer it.

Jesus went to a festival in Jerusalem, the most *sacred* city in the world, but instead of partaking in the festivities, or going to God's temple, he went straight for a complex that housed a pool rumored to heal those with serious disabilities.

People would gather for years, waiting for an underground spring to disturb the waters of the pool, and for their *chance* to get into the pool at just the right moment and be healed. And Jesus approached the man who had been there the *longest*—who had been waiting for thirty-eight years (longer than Jesus had been alive), because his disability prevented him from making it to the front of the line on the occasions that the pool began to bubble. It was a Catch-22; he came to the pool because he needed to be *healed*, but because he needed so *much* healing it was easy for others to push him out of the way and take his place. And they did. For thirty-eight years they got in his way, again and again.

Jesus sought out a place full of the most disadvantaged in society, and within it sought out the person in *the* worst position he could find... and it was *him* that he healed.

We see him do that very thing again and again throughout his travels. Whether he's faced with a bustling crowd, or his view is blocked by those clamoring for his attention, he is always able to pick out the *one*. The ignored one. The belittled one. The one shoved to the side.

Jesus Christ recognized that alleviating the *pain* and the *brokenness* of people that are *ignored* or *rejected* by others *is* the work of God.

We find recorded in *three* of the four Gospels an account of Jesus healing a woman who had been unable to stop bleeding for twelve years—someone the religious officials never would have gone *near*, for a woman's blood was considered "ritually unclean." At another time, we see him saving the life of a woman the entire *town* wanted to *stone* to death, and offering her forgiveness.

In a world where anyone with a skin condition was exiled for *life* on the off-chance their affliction might spread to others, Jesus chose to provide companionship to lepers. And when the disciples rebuked the little children, Jesus said that *theirs* is the Kingdom of God.

He cured a Roman soldier's slave, he removed devils that were driving men insane, he healed blind beggars and foreigners and the most downtrodden of society, uplifting them and giving them an opportunity for fullness of life and a place in community. He embraced them when no one who was *anyone* would even *look* at them. He showed God's love to people society would only force out.

Every time we *ignore* someone—or a *group* of someones—that is marginalized, dehumanized, disenfranchised... anyone who's oppressed, alienated, underserved, or brutalized... we are getting in the way of God's work.

And every time we perform an act that heals the wounded, uplifts the downtrodden, welcomes the exiled, or mends the rifts between human beings... we are taking *part* in God's work. We are showing that we *learned* the answer to the question, "Who does Jesus want me to help?"

Now the final verse in our reading for today included the words, "that day was a sabbath." It mentions that as a segue into what comes next in John 5: an altercation between Jesus and the authorities, those who cited the well-known rule that you can't *work* on the Sabbath. The holiest day of the week. The "rest" day. Jesus' act of healing was to them an unholy and blasphemous act, because it was done on the day that was meant for focusing on God alone. And isn't that a great irony? Doing *God's* work is technically *work*, so doing what is *right* in *that* moment was considered *wrong*. *Helping* a man who had been *suffering* for *years* was suddenly the *wrong* thing to do. Which sounds ridiculous, but it's not the only example of that kind of logic in the religious world.

Have you ever heard a Christian say that we *shouldn't* help those in need? Because I have. Yet Jesus didn't call what *he* was doing "hand-outs" or "entitlements," and he didn't look down on people in need as "takers" or "welfare queens." He didn't consider the Kingdom of God—where everyone would have all that they needed—a "nanny state," and he didn't consider pilgrims seeking a better life "threats" seeking to "replace" us.

When people with power were getting in the way of God's work by trying to persecute Jesus for his actions at the healing pool, Jesus simply said, "My Father is still working, so I am also."

So often in this world I see Christians getting in the way of God's work just like that. It's not hard for *any* of us to slip into it... to become Christians who invoke God's name when we need to, but whose *actions* don't seem to resemble Christ in any way.

I see *some* of those who call themselves "pro-life," whose efforts on *behalf* of those lives seem to end the moment they're born. I see some who yearn for this to be a truly Christian nation, all while abandoning those in need, spitting on the oppressed, wasting and destroying God's Creation, spending money on swords instead of plowshares, and *hating* their enemies instead of loving them.

Some of the most outspoken Christians on TV, in the news, in our government... they say they have faith in God, but I don't see them living out that faith. Not in the ways Jesus did. And that's a trap we can all fall into.

None of us are perfect. But we have to get better at doing the work of God... and stop getting in the way of it so often.

You may remember that *two* questions bubbled up for me earlier in this sermon: "Who does Jesus want me to help," which we can answer by looking to *Christ*; and, "What power do *I* have," a question which *comes* from looking at Christ.

In today's reading we see that *he* had the power to do miraculous acts of healing—a power that we sadly don't share in the same way. But he also demonstrated the power to stand up to an obstacle that was blocking people from caring for those most in need. And that's a power we *all* have.

And the Bible is clear—we've been learning about it in Sunday School for months now—we all have different gifts, different skills, different ways that we *can* do the work of God in this world.

So as you're wrestling with the answer to the *first* question—*who* does God want *me* to *help*—I hope that you're looking for the answer to the second: "What power do *I* have to do it?" How can *I* help those God wants me to help? What can *I* do, big or small, wherever and whenever I am... to *serve* those in need, to *care* for those in a bad situation, to *uplift* those who have been brought low?

We've got four whole Gospels to help answer the first question. It's up to you and God to work out the answer to the second one.

Let's get to it, together. Amen.