

Sin No More..

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This is the sixth Sunday of Easter. The Easter flowers and their fragrance have been gone for over a month now. We don't say those triumphant words that we so boldly spoke on Easter morning as frequently. I trust you remember and can say them with the same enthusiasm on Easter morning: "Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!"

We are now looking forward to the Ascension of Jesus and the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church. But today our short Gospel reading brings us back to the themes and messages of the Passion and Easter. We have a redemption story and a story that points us to the need for our Savior, Jesus, and the salvation found in Him.

St. John tells us the time of this episode in Jesus' ministry occurs at a particular time. It's a time of feast for the "Jews." But He doesn't tell us which one. He just says there was a feast of the Jews. It could have been one of several feasts designated by God in Leviticus 23. How many of you know the number of feasts designated by God in Leviticus 23? (In the Bible it is always safe to guess seven – the perfect number.) There were seven feasts? The first was the Feast of the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of First Fruits, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Atonement, and the Feast of Booths. They were split into two groups, four in the spring and three in the fall. Because Jesus was at this Feast in Jerusalem we can guess that it was one of the three pilgrim feasts - The Passover (Feast of Unleavened Bread), the

Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) - because all Jewish adult men were required to attend in Jerusalem in obedience to God's Word in Deuteronomy 16:16. No one knows for sure. Some Biblical scholars believe it to be the Feast of the Tabernacles or Booths which was held between late September and early October. So, St. John is introducing obedience to God and His Law here.

The location is in the City of Jerusalem, the same city in which Jesus will eventually be put on trial, beaten, suffer humiliation, be nailed to a cross, and die. St. John is very specific as to where in Jerusalem this takes place. First, he tells us it is at the Sheep Gate. (This gate is referenced in Nehemiah 3:1 and 12:39). It was the first Gate restored to the wall of Jerusalem in 445 B.C. by the High Priest and his fellow priests and the only one that was set apart as holy.

Jesus always entered Jerusalem through this gate except for the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday. It was on the north wall of the city. Sheep which were to be sacrificed were brought into the Temple after being washed in a pool outside the city. That pool was originally a water reservoir used to collect rainwater that was used for cleansing purposes by the Temple. But now, it has a name and a unique architecture. Since St. John says, ***"there is"*** he must have written this before 70 A.D. and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans. St. John tells us the name of the pool in Aramaic was Bethesda. You Bible scholars all know that a name starting with Beth means "house" or "house of" and in this name the second syllable means "mercy." So the name of the pool was the "House of Mercy." The pool looked like a square eight because it was really two pools with a dividing wall between the two.

One side was used for washing the animals and the other for bathing. The pools had five porches, like covered verandas, open on one side but protected from the sun and rain overhead. The community had provided these porches to protect the invalids who collected there from the elements. There were five porches. Often in Scripture, the number five represents mercy. The invalids who came to this pool waited for someone to have mercy on them and help them to the pool.

St. Augustine interpreted this figuratively because he explained that the five colonnades were symbols of the five books of Moses which is the Law and the water in the pool was a symbol for the Jewish people. He said, ***“That water,”*** then—namely, that people—***“were shut in by the five books of Moses, as by five porches. They were crippled, lame, arthritic and invalid because they were living under the curse of the Law. They came to the pool of mercy to be healed.”***

Did you notice that the reading skips from verse three to verse five? There is no verse four. That’s not a typo in the Bible. No Greek manuscript before A.D. 400 contained the last phrase from verses three and a verse four. When added those verses read that the ***“invalids – blind, lame and paralyzed lay helpless in the colonnades,”*** and then added ***“3b waiting for the moving of the water; 4 for an angel went down at certain times into the pool, and stirred up the water. Whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made whole of whatever disease he had.”*** Several manuscripts include these words, but most Biblical scholars today consider them to be a gloss (a later scribal addition to the original). Most modern translations omit them or include them only as a footnote.

These words implied that the water was seen as having magical qualities based on the myth that an angel caused the water to swirl. The true explanation for the swirling water was that the pools were probably linked to a subterranean spring and the water from the spring would gush upward at various times. Those springs probably contained water with a high mineral content that had a medicinal benefit, especially for those suffering from muscle and joint aches. Similar to the hot springs found in Arkansas, Colorado, Wyoming, California, and other places in our country.

The invalid people who came to the Pool at Bethesda sought relief from their illness. Jesus came into this setting. He came to the pool and saw a scene of desperation before Him, a multitude of people lying helpless. All of them were made in God's image and all of them were unable to do anything to help themselves. He approached one man (who was unnamed) who had been an invalid for 38 years, more than half of his life. Jesus asked him if he wanted to be healed. How would you have answered? The man doesn't answer Jesus. He is completely focused on what he believes is his salvation – getting into the waters first. He doesn't recognize Jesus and never calls Him by name. The nameless man is hopeless because he couldn't be the first to get to that water. He admits it when he says, he had no one to help him get in the waters first when they began to eddy in the pool. Other invalids, apparently, may have had a relative or friend to help them get into the water first but he had no one. Maybe his parents had died and maybe he had no friends because he was an invalid and probably was poor. He probably thought that Jesus would be the one who would help him. Jesus would help

him but not in the way he thought. He was so focused on the water that he saw no other way to be freed from his invalid condition and the prison of his mat. His only hope for relief by his own actions was to get in the water but doing so was out of his control. He was certainly hopeless and had placed all his faith in his own efforts which were failing him.

It reminds me of a story. There was a man in the community who had an offensive body odor. After being snubbed by people numerous times for his offensive BO, he decided to go to a doctor to see if the doctor could do anything about it. The doctor examined him and couldn't find anything wrong with him physically. Exasperated, the doctor asked the man, "What do you do for a living?" The man sighed and said, "Well, that may be the problem. You see I work at the airport and it's my job to empty the holding tanks from the restrooms onboard the aircraft after they land. It's all over head, you know, and invariably, some of the spillages end up getting on me. Try as I may, it's really hard to get it off." The doctor thought for a while and said, "Sounds to me like you need another line of work. Why don't you find a more sanitary job somewhere?" The man looked at the doctor in amazement and said, "What? And get out of aviation?!"

We reek with the smell of sin in our hearts, minds, and bodies. While we are born physically alive, we are also spiritually dead at birth. We are plagued and paralyzed by original sin, the sin of Adam, as his offspring. Original sin is so pervasive that it has affected us in every way. Being born with this original sin, we have a condition from which we cannot free ourselves. And try as we will get to the waters of grace, just like the man in our Gospel. And we

don't even want to make a change like a man at the airport in my story.

Jesus comes as the Lamb of God and washes away all that sin. He does it. He does it by His word, just as Jesus told the invalid man in our Gospel, ***“Get up, take up your bed, and walk.”*** By His words, Jesus healed the man. Jesus healed us of our sin by his word when he said, ***“It is finished.”*** on the cross. The man did nothing. We did nothing. Jesus acted for us by His suffering, death, and resurrection. Just as Jesus gave this man a gift of healing for the affliction of his physical body, He gave us the healing of our spiritual affliction, our sin. Just as this man could not save himself by reaching the pool of Bethesda, “the pool of grace,” we cannot save ourselves and earn the grace of God. Grace came for this man only by the love of God the Father through Jesus. Grace comes to us the same way.

At the beginning of his Gospel, the Apostle John writes one of his main themes: ***“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”*** (John 1:16–17). The physical healing of this man was a miracle and showed that Jesus was God. It demonstrated the grace and mercy of God for the physical well-being of man. God does the same for us through Jesus in our physical bodies, but more importantly, healing is of our souls.

There is a postscript to this story in verses 14-17. Jesus meets the man in the Temple and says to him in verse 14, ***“See you are well. Sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you.”*** Jesus had not only healed the man (which showed Jesus to be the Messiah and the Son of God, the

one who created all things and could therefore renew all things) but Jesus also forgave the man all his sins.

What lessons are there in this story for us on this Easter Sunday? Clearly, we see we are incapable of saving ourselves. It is only through faith in the grace earned by Jesus that we are saved. It is hopeless to seek the things of this world to bring about our salvation and to futility to focus on them. Things like wealth, power, success, and good works. Our focus needs to be on Jesus and Jesus alone. Everything else is a myth and will not give us healing or salvation from the sins within us.

Physical and spiritual healing is a free gift from God through Jesus. The man didn't see it but he, and all people, are given the grace of God without charge. Our repetitive striving will only lead to repetitive failure. If we do not show our faith in our actions, we have none and we are truly lost.

The man in this story did obey Jesus. He got up and left. He may not have had faith that was ongoing but for a moment he accepted the command of Jesus and received the gift of healing. But did you notice? He never said thank you to Jesus. Maybe he was too overwhelmed. Maybe his newfound health was so exhilarating that he lost sight of Jesus. Maybe that is why Jesus found him in the Temple – he was giving thanks to God. Or maybe he was just ungrateful and for this Jesus had to warn him not to sin.

How do you thank God for the mercy and grace He has shown you by the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus? Does your life show you as sinning no more and following Jesus' warning to this man or do you take your salvation for granted?

A man was healed from a life of paralysis. He was freed from a life of misery and a loss of hope. We have been freed from a life of paralysis in sin. We have been given a life to live in thanksgiving, praise, hope, and joy. It would seem counterintuitive to go back to living a life of slavery to sin without hope and happiness as healed, redeemed people of God, wouldn't it?

Jesus doesn't need to ask me a second time if I want to be healed. How about you? He did it for me and for you. He did because of His love and the Father's love, who sent Him. So we owe a great debt of gratitude to God our Father and Jesus which can never be repaid. The only way to begin to repay it is by how we live our lives. To God and to His glory. Amen.