

Easter 6, 2016

## **Do This, Not That**

The Rev. Sue Sommer

Some things seem to transcend time and place. One that I'm thinking of is something we now call, "Life Hacks" but which historically we've known as Wisdom Teaching. "Do This, Not That." You see it everywhere: social media, TED talks on YouTube, books on topics like how to exercise, how to invest your money, how to eat healthy in restaurants, and more. "Do This, Not That." Nothing new. Those of us who are Boomers may remember the children's magazine *Highlights* that featured the characters Goofus and Galant. Or the children's TV show *Romper Room* featuring the Do-bee and the Don't-bee. Whole books of the Bible explore this topic: Proverbs. The Wisdom of Solomon. And so on.

And our Easter lectionary explores "Do This, Not That" as well. Last Sunday's reading from Acts featured Peter describing his encounter with Cornelius the Roman Centurian. Peter had been open to the power of the Holy Spirit working within him, and because of that, the Gospel spread into a different social stratum in Roman society. But it was a risky move with respect to his own status among his companions in Jerusalem. Peter found himself pushing the envelope in ways that just a short time ago would have been inconceivable. And the story is shared with us in the spirit of, "Do this." Listen, trust, ponder anew what the Almighty can do, act boldly, trust some more."

So last week, "Do this." This week? "Not that." I refer to that odd healing story in our gospel passage for today. John is the only gospel in which we find the healing of the paralyzed man by the pool of Beth-zatha or Bethesda. Archaeologists actually have identified such a pool in the general vicinity that John gives. It fits the parameters of a sacred pool known as an asclepion, which would have probably dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC when the Greek Empire ruled that part of the world. Asclepius was the Greek god of healing. That one such pool was located in such close proximity to the Temple might seem surprising, but in fact, evidence of the religious practices of conquering empires was plentiful in cities throughout Israel, and were used by many of the Jewish people. There was more religious fluidity than perhaps we see on the pages of Scripture. Can you imagine what a thorn that must have been in the sides of devout Jews who wished to keep themselves unpolluted by Gentile religious practices? (Perhaps helps us understand the zeal of the Pharisees a bit better.)

Lying by the pool of Beth-zatha – Bethesda – was a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. Virtually a lifetime. He was cut off from family and friends who might have helped him into the pool, because that is what illness did in that culture. He was spiritually and socially isolated, paralyzed in more ways than one. So much so that when Jesus asks him if he wants to be made well, his answer reflects not hope, but paralysis of the spirit. "Someone gets in ahead of me every time," he says. "I have no one to help." Perhaps some of us can relate. If you've done hard time in the land of depression, or alcoholism, or chronic illness of any sort, you know that it can be virtually impossible to imagine life better than it is. You are trapped both by your illness and by what that illness can do to your entire life. Suffice to say, this guy by the asclepion demonstrated no faith. He didn't ask for healing. He didn't even ask Jesus to help him into the pool. But Jesus healed him.

We read the remainder of this passage because it gives the full context. The guy picked up his mat and walked off. No expression of gratitude. No walking and leaping and praising God. No earnest petition to become a follower. No proclamation to others of the mighty work that was done. And when the religious authorities call him out on the scandal of him carrying his mat on the Sabbath (in clear violation of the Torah) he lamely tells them that he is only following orders of the guy who healed him. And then, when Jesus later approaches him in the Temple, he rats Jesus out to the authorities. Who then, John tells us, begin to make plans to kill Jesus. So...yeah. Not that.

We should note that Jesus does not reverse the miracle of healing in retaliation for the man's cluelessness and cowardice. That's not how Jesus rolls, then or now. Faith is not a pre-requisite for healing, nor is it demanded from those who are healed.

But for that unnamed guy, it was a series of missed opportunities. Though he was no longer physically paralyzed, he was trapped in spiritual paralysis. And it is here that we begin to see why the lectionary included this odd, unedifying account during the season of Easter. Because the healing and the restoration that we experience through the Resurrection of Christ releases us from the paralysis of Sin. It is a gift that comes to us with no strings attached. The baptism that we undergo welcomes us into eternal fellowship with Christ through the grace of God. Bethesda. House of Grace is what it means in Hebrew. It's where we live, so to speak, thanks to the unmerited gift given to us by God.

The question is, how do we live that grace? Having been released from the paralysis of sin, how might we live lives of gratitude, and praise? How might we share our faith with others? How might we do more of this, and not that?