

**Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the thirtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.ⁱⁱ

“... For thus saith the LORD, Thy bruise is incurable, and thy wound is grievous. There is none to plead thy cause, that thou mayest be bound up: thou hast no healing medicines. All thy lovers have forgotten thee; they seek thee not; for I have wounded thee with the wound of an enemy, with the chastisement of a cruel one, for the multitude of thine iniquity; because thy sins were increased. Why criest thou for thine affliction? thy sorrow is incurable for the multitude of thine iniquity: because thy sins were increased, I have done these things unto thee. Therefore all they that devour thee shall be devoured; and all thine adversaries, every one of them, shall go into captivity; and they that spoil thee shall be a spoil, and all that prey upon thee will I give for a prey. For I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the LORD; because they called thee an Outcast, saying, This is Zion, whom no man seeketh after.

“Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I will bring again the captivity of Jacob’s tents, and have mercy on his dwellingplaces; and the city shall be builded upon her own heap, and the palace shall remain after the manner thereof. And out of them shall proceed thanksgiving and the voice of them that make merry: and I will multiply them, and they shall not be few; I will also glorify them, and they shall not be small. Their children also shall be as aforetime, and their congregation shall be established before me, and I will punish all that oppress them. And their nobles shall be of themselves, and their governor shall proceed from the midst of them; and I will cause him to draw near, and he shall approach unto me: for who is this that engaged his heart to approach unto me? saith the LORD. And ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.ⁱⁱⁱ

“After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda [**beh-THEZZ-duh**], having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath. The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed. He answered them, He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk. Then asked they him, What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk? And he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place. Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee. The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole. And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “When Jesus saw him and knew that he had been lying there a long time he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made whole?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down before me’”.^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Jesus had not said anything about the water or the problem of getting into the water. The question was “Do you want to be made whole?” But instead of simply answering, “Yes I want to be made whole,” the man began talking about something that Jesus had not asked about and did not really care about.

The pool in question apparently had a therapeutic effect, but only at certain times. It may be that a geyser erupted underground from time to time and carried certain minerals and heat to the top. But the belief was that an angel stirred up the water from time to time and the first person to get into the pool at that time would be healed of his infirmities.

We’re not told exactly what was wrong with the man, but he had been hanging around the pool for thirty-eight years, according to the story, hoping to be the first one in when the water was stirred up. The problem, as he saw it, was that he could not get to the water without help, and there was nobody willing to wait with him and help him. That’s all he could think of when Jesus made the offer to heal him.

There is no doubt that he wanted to be healed, but thirty-eight years of frustration had led to a narrowing of the man’s vision. He had become so obsessed with getting into the pool that he lost sight of the whole purpose of it. The means had become an end in itself, and in the process, the man wound up placing a restriction on the way in which he could receive God’s help. He had to receive it by getting into the pool.

Jesus knew that the water was merely a vehicle through which the grace and power of God was made available to some people. Jesus Himself was the vehicle through which the grace and power of God was made available to all people. So He took charge of the situation and issued a command: “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.”

That was a critical moment in this broken man's life. Would he respond in faith and do what Jesus commanded, or would he remain fixated on the pool and insist that he could only be healed by getting into it at the right time?

We all know the answer to that. But what we don't know is the answer to a similar situation that we face as Anglicans in America today.

The Church of England, from which we are descended, was often torn between high churchmen, who championed our catholic heritage, and low churchmen, who emphasized the contributions of the Protestant Reformation. The dispute, which saw men martyred on both sides, was eventually settled by the adoption of The Book of Common Prayer.

The Prayer Book made no mention of such things as clergy vestments, incense, the sign of the cross, or other controversial matters that Cranmer considered to be of minor importance. Those were all, like the pool at Bethesda, vehicles through which some people were helped and others were not. The prayer book focused on the reading of Scripture, the participation in the sacraments, and the common prayers of the people. Those are matters of importance. But too many Anglicans have never completely gotten over their focus on some of the ancillary matters of church life.

When the Anglicans in America obtained independence from The Church of England, there were three American bishops. Samuel Seabury of Connecticut was an ardent high churchman. Samuel Provoost of New York was an adamant low churchman. The two Samuels disliked each other personally and were far apart liturgically and politically. It was up to the third bishop, another low churchman, William White of Pennsylvania, to keep the other two bishops from tearing the young church apart before it could even get started. He did that by very tactfully keeping the two enemies focused on the big picture instead of on the details of churchmanship – details that White, like Cranmer, considered to be of small consequence.

I really wish there had been a William White on the scene when the continuing church movement began back in the 1970s. Those who gathered in St. Louis to declare independence from The Episcopal

Church were rebelling against important matters: the ordination of women, the Gnostic influence on the new prayer book, the rejection of Scriptural authority in matters of marriage, divorce, and abortion. But it was not long before those traditionally-minded clergy and laymen began to quarrel among themselves over details of churchmanship as well as personal ambitions. So once again today, we find ourselves, like the man in the story, focusing on the pool of water rather than on the power of Christ to make us whole.

I am embarrassed, as all of us should be, by the fact that we who try to preserve the Anglican way in the midst of apostasy, can say the same prayers, read the same Scriptures, celebrate the same sacraments, and worship the same Christ, but cannot honor each other's sacramental acts or interchange members and clergy. The resulting fragmentation is a disgrace to the spirit of Anglicanism and a grievous sin before God.

In our diocese there are parishes that use The Anglican Missal, incense, Sanctus bells and a variety of other ceremonial niceties. They use those things because they believe they help people to deepen their faith.

There are other parishes like ours which stay with the Altar Service Book and find those other matters distracting rather than helpful. The attitude of our bishop and all the clergy that I know is one of "Live and let live." And yet there is at least one parish I know of that broke apart over such matters.

The sick man by the pool was able to get over his pre-occupation with the pool and the angel and the competition for a place in the water. He found the faith and the courage to focus on Jesus and do what the Lord commanded, even though Jesus was telling him to do something he had never done before and was by no means confident he could do. He relied on the power of Christ and got up and walked away whole without ever getting into the pool of water. Will we, as modern Anglicans, find the faith and the courage to do the same?

I realize it is our bishops who must lead us into unity. But we are the ones who elect our bishops, and in less than a year we will elect one in this diocese. We need to begin praying about that now.

We also need to take our concerns to the Chief Bishop Himself by praying every day for the unity of the body of Christ.

There is a prayer on page 37 of our Book of Common Prayer.^v I would like to conclude this sermon by asking you to pray that prayer with me, and I would also ask you to pray that prayer every day at home. Page 37 at the bottom:

O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace; Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions. Take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatsoever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that s there is but one Body and one Spirit, and one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

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St. David's Anglican Church
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Jeremiah 30: 12-22 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. John 5: 1-16 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. John 5: 6-7 (RSV).*

^v *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 37 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*