

The Rev. Jeremiah Williamson
John 5:1-9

What We Deserve

This guy was a real piece of work. I mean, I didn't know him. I don't even know that much about him, not even his name. But he just doesn't seem like a very good dude.

Not that you would know that from our Gospel reading today. We got the good ending: a healed man walking into the sunset, carrying the mat upon which he helplessly reclined for weeks, months, years. It is a lovely ending - only, it's not the ending at all.

The real ending is not lovely. The real ending is the religious leaders plotting Jesus' death.

And it is really this guy's fault. I'm telling you: this guy was a real piece of work. First, Jesus finds him lying beside the pool by the Sheep Gate. I should be clear: this wasn't like a public swimming pool for the neighborhood kids; he wasn't sun-bathing. He was sick and so was everyone else parked by this pool. They were the blind, lame, and paralyzed. And to add to insult to injury, they had the misfortune of living in a time in which there were not social services or federal assistance or helpful targeted programs. And so, for the most part these folks were hopeless - except for this pool.

The pool was thought to be miraculous - like Colorado at the height of the tuberculosis crisis: the place to go if one was ailing or infirm. And by the time Jesus shows up, the man had the formula all figured out: first person in when the water was stirred was the winner, but it was never him.

The man had been ill for thirty-eight years - that's a really long time. And he had been lying by that pool for a long time too. Presumably, he had watched folks walk out of the pool and into a healthier life - no longer confined to a water-side mat. And it just seemed like it would never be his turn.

And then: Jesus. Jesus sees him. And Jesus asks that man a question that would forever change his life: Do you want to be made well?

Well, that is an obvious one, right? I mean the text has already told us that the man had been sick for almost four decades; he is sitting by a magical healing pool; and he lives in a society in which an illness like his meant an inescapable life of extreme poverty. Jesus, do you even need to ask? Obviously the man is going to say, "Yes! Yes! A thousand times Yes!"

But not this guy; this guy, he does not answer yes. He explains to Jesus why it is never going to happen: he is too slow. And it is not his fault. It is a defensive answer – almost as if the man has heard the question before, almost as if the question was an accusation.

There was a pernicious theological idea in those days that people who were ill or poor or died young deserved it; they must have done something, folks reasoned, that caused or at least justified their misfortune. We see evidence of this later in John's Gospel when Jesus and his disciples pass a man born blind and Jesus' disciples wonder, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Because, they figured, someone was at fault.

Back to the pool. Jesus doesn't wait for a "yes". In response to the man's explanation, Jesus just heals him. Did he deserve his illness? I have no idea. Did he deserve this healing? I have no idea. Did he even want to be healed? I have no idea. The Gospel makes no mention of him thanking Jesus, or praising God, or dancing through the streets. He just picks up his mat and walks away.

And that is where our Gospel text ended today. But there is more to the story. And I gotta say, the rest of the story does not reflect well on the man – and it makes one question Jesus' decision making ability.

There were a lot of people around that pool in need of healing. Jesus chose this guy. And we have no indication of why he made his choice. But I suspect there were people more deserving. I suspect there were people who would have appreciated it much more than this guy did.

So after being healed, the man does what Jesus says and takes up his mat and walks away. On his way out, he is stopped by the Jewish religious leaders and questioned. Turns out: it is the Sabbath and this man is not supposed to be carrying a mat on the Sabbath. So, in response to their questioning, the man blames Jesus. He tells them, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" He totally throws Jesus under the bus. This is the thanks Jesus gets for healing this man. However, the man never bothered to get Jesus' name so he can't properly turn him in. Yet.

Later in the story, Jesus sees the man again and encourages him. At that point this guy gets Jesus' name and, if you can believe this, goes out of his way to find those Jewish religious leaders and turn Jesus in to them. This is how he repays Jesus for healing him. He repays Jesus' amazing kindness with betrayal. Our Gospel tells us that the religious leaders then begin to plot Jesus' murder.

Nice guy, right? Of all the people Jesus could have healed, this guy had to be the worst, least deserving, most cynical man sitting by that pool. Jesus changed his life. He was rotting by a pool with no hope of ever getting any better. And Jesus loved him enough to give him back

his life, to give him hope, to give him purpose. And he sold Jesus out as soon as he had the chance.

Some of you may know Graham Greene's stunning novel *The Power and the Glory*. The main character in that novel is an anti-hero of a priest. He is flawed and self-loathing; he drinks too much and has failed to live up to his ordination vows many times over. He got a woman pregnant and then abandoned her and their child. While on the run in a state that had outlawed religious practice, he hears confessions, people always want to confess to him their sins - "an awful jumble of the gross, the trivial, and the grotesque" he says. In hearing yet another sordid confession, he reflects: "It was for this world that Christ had died: the more evil you saw and heard about you, the greater the glory lay around the death; it was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful, for home or children or civilization - it needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt."

This world needs a God who is willing to touch the diseased, to forgive the betrayers, to love those who least deserve love.

I see it all the time, probably you do too: on facebook, on TV, in the newspaper. In the Church and in this nation: folks constantly making judgments on who deserves what - who deserves and does not deserve assistance, who deserves and does not deserve resources, even who deserves and does not deserve love.

And yet, in this Gospel, this man, sitting by the pool, he doesn't deserve Jesus' touch, he doesn't deserve Jesus' generosity, he doesn't deserve Jesus' love. He's a betrayer. He sells Jesus out. He repays good with evil. He is so very human.

Jesus heals a lot people in the Gospels. And you know, while this guy is probably the worst of them, not one of them deserved it, earned it, or could ever repay him.

It is grace, just grace - the very idea that sustains the Church. Jesus never worries about who deserves his love. He just loves. He loves us. But he also loves that guy in today's Gospel. And he loves the half-hearted and the corrupt. He loves every undeserving scoundrel out there.

Let other people argue about who deserves what. Let us be about following Jesus, following his example, following in his footsteps the best we can. Jesus has showed each of us more grace than we could ever earn or deserve. But it is not enough to just get it; not enough to toss him the occasional thank you. Our mission is to bear witness to that Grace in this world, this world of half-hearted and corrupt people, this world for which Christ died.

We don't have time to pass judgment anyway; we have good news share. This Gospel of grace, with which we have been so richly blessed, is our good news. The good news is: Jesus never gives us what we deserve.

