

SERMON: "HELPING---SIMPLY HELPING"

SCRIPTURE: JOHN 5:1-16

DATE: JULY 19, 2015

John 5:1-16 (NIV)

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

⁷ "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

⁸ Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."

¹¹ But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' "

¹² So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"

¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."

¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

¹⁶ So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.

"God helps those who help themselves."

That's a pretty well-known biblical statement, isn't it?

"God helps those who help themselves."

I can't begin to recall how many times I've heard that statement on the lips of people---countless times. I know I've often said it myself.

It's a part of our understanding of our way of life---the way God works. It very much supports the nature of our society, which is becoming more and more oriented to the American tradition of rugged individualism.

"God helps those who help themselves."

It's a way of saying one gets what one deserves.

It's a way of emphasizing our partnership with God to make our life successful.

It's a way of putting our efforts and work in the picture when it comes to explaining achievement or failure.

But there's a problem.

You see, I can't find that famous phrase in the Bible. I admit, in all humility, that I don't have the Bible memorized and I might have missed it---but I don't think so.

This morning, I want us to look at a story that doesn't say "God helps those who help themselves."

This story simply says, "God helps!"

Jesus was in Jerusalem with His disciples. He came upon a pool named Bethesda. This was no ordinary pool. It was special. Very, very occasionally the waters stirred and when that happened the first person into the pool was healed of whatever ailment they had.

Naturally there were all kinds of people crowded around the pool. There were blind people, the lame and the paralyzed. Each waited to see or hear the ripple in the water and then there was a mad rush to be the first one to get wet.

Imagine the crowding, the waiting, the anticipation.
No one knew when the water would be stirred.

And so, they sat by the water.

They crouched by the pool.

They kept their eyes and ears open---waiting, hoping, longing for it to be their turn.

One man, an invalid, had been coming to the pool for 38 years---38 years! We don't know what his problem was but obviously he hadn't been able to reach the water in time. He had waited and struggled and watched others be successful, but not himself.

38 years of waiting, hoping, anticipating. He certainly couldn't remain alert all the time.

I wonder how many times the stirring had caught him napping.
I wonder how many times he happened to be looking the other way at the wrong time.

Someone always seemed to get there first.

I wonder if he ever even made it in at all---if he ever even got wet---if he ever even placed second.

No matter where he lay, he couldn't get up and get over and get in fast enough. He didn't have anyone to help him. No one to watch with him. No one to push him quick enough into the pool.

Still he came---38 years!
Probably every day.

Why not?
He had no place else to go.

Perhaps he was able to receive some alms.
Perhaps that's how he survived.

And then Jesus arrived.

The Lord heard about this man who had aged so much laying by this pool. Jesus asked the man if he wanted to get well.

What had the 38 years done to this man?
Did he still have hope or was he there out of habit?
Was he there to get to the water or just to have his hand out?

The man replied that his problem was a lack of help. His problem was in being alone. He couldn't do it himself and no one was there to offer assistance. He was by himself and he could do nothing to help himself. He was helpless but not hopeless!

Was his reply genuine or an excuse?

38 years is a long time.

Perhaps he had started out so many years ago wanting to get to the water but was that what he really wanted now?

How settled was he in his routine?

We don't know.

We aren't aware of all the complexities of this man's life and hopes and dreams. We can only speculate and, like all speculation, we can arrive at opposite conclusions depending on how we see things and what baggage we bring to the speculation.

But we do know that Jesus helped. He didn't push the man into the water---He simply healed him where he lay.

And we need to note two things about this healing.

First, the man didn't know who Jesus was so the healing had nothing to do with the man's faith---he didn't have any.

And second, the man was healed on the Sabbath and the Jewish leaders got after him.

This kind of thing wasn't to be done on the Sabbath.

The man, when he found out who Jesus was, went to the leaders and told on the Lord. In effect he said, "It wasn't my fault---He did it!"

And so the man wasn't healed because of his innate righteousness. Indeed, we are told in verse 16 that the man's pointing to Jesus caused the Lord to be persecuted.

So much for a thank you!

It's a strange story, isn't it?

A man, whom some might consider a hope-filled optimist, while others might consider him a habitual layabout, is healed. And then he protects himself by getting Jesus into trouble. No wonder he didn't have any friends!!

But we come back to the beginning.

"God helps those who help themselves."

The healing was the Lord's initiative. It was the Lord's gift. The man did nothing, believed nothing to deserve it.

The man didn't help himself. Jesus helped him.

It's a strange story, isn't it?

It's strange because it goes against the grain for us.

We're used to working for what we receive.
We're used to feeling we need to deserve our rewards.
We're used to feeling others should deserve what they get.

And here's someone, who not only receives healing when he does nothing to deserve it---he actually turns around and causes problems for Jesus!

That really goes against the grain. The man should have, at least, been thankful. He should have, at least, covered up for Jesus.

We might wish Jesus hadn't bothered with him.

Yet the Lord knew what He was doing.

Grace---unconditional love and care---doesn't hold back on compassion.

God doesn't only help those who help themselves---God simply helps.

That's our responsibility too!

And sometimes it goes against the grain.

We like to help those we like.
We like to help those who will appreciate it.
We like to help those we can relate to.

And all that is well and good. We should help those people. But we're also called to help those we don't think much of---those who are not appreciative and those we have little sympathy for.

People, who are struggling, don't always fit the image we like.

Often in society those who are struggling are blamed for their struggles rather than helped. It's called "blaming the victim."

A wife said to her husband one day, "I met a fellow downtown this morning, and right away I knew he was a troublemaker. He started to insult me. He used bad language, even threatened me."

"How did you meet this fellow?" her husband asked.

"I hit him with the car."

Blaming the victim---society does it all the time. We are part of society.

Sometimes it's easier not to help when we think we can find fault with the person who is troubled.

The single Mom who has another child.

The alcoholic who falls off the wagon.

The employee who is burning out and needs to cut down their hours at work, but doesn't.

The abused wife who should simply walk away.

The teen who needs to find new friends to hang out with, but doesn't.

The grieving person who "really" has to put it all behind them and move on.

The parents who can't control their child's behaviour.

The unemployed person who should just get out there and do something---anything.

If only they would help themselves, then God would help them too.

If only they would help themselves, then maybe others would help them.

But people's problems are far too complicated to allow us to sit back and make pronouncements. There's always more to a situation than we might know.

It's too easy to blame the victim when what is really needed is compassion, understanding, grace and help.

"God helps those who help themselves."

It's not an untrue statement.

God does help those who help themselves.

But God also helps those who make a mess of their lives---and the way God usually helps is through God's Church---God's people---us.

An old Quaker story tells about a visitor coming into the silence of a Quaker Meeting for worship and asking the person next to him, "What time does the service begin?"

The Quaker said, "When the worship is over."

Our worship this morning is almost over. We have service to do.
 May we do it with the mind and love of Christ as our guide.
 May we look beyond circumstances and conditions.
 May we help---simply help!

(1545)

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