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Christ Our Anchor Presbyterian Church  
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John 5: 1-18

## TAKE UP YOUR MAT AND WALK

How do you show up for a festival?

What do you expect when you go to the Apple Festival, the Renaissance Festival, the Festival of Lights, the Jazz Festival, Mardi Gras, Fourth of July? You expect community merriment, good food, drinks, maybe music and dancing, celebration.

We have times in the liturgical year that we consider religious festivals; days that honor God in specific ways and bring the community together in hope and celebration: Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost.

In the Hebrew Bible in the Book of Leviticus, God ordained seven Festival Days for the people of Israel. Those festivals are still celebrated today. These are high holy days of honoring God. Not all of them include revelry. There are days of rest and fasting as well.

But in Jesus's day, it was expected that you would make a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem to honor God. That's where you would find the people on a feast day. After the liturgy, the celebration might include dancing, food, drinks, people enjoying being with their fellow Jews. Many of these occasions would evolve into merriment and tambourines.

Our text this morning tells us that Jesus made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for a festival.

If you wanted to find Jesus, you'd look for him at the temple, participating in all the festivities.

You wouldn't have expected Jesus to show up at the pool of Beth-zatha or as some translations have it, Bethesda or Bethsaida.

Beth-zatha was the location of the health care system for the poor, the overcrowded city hospital, the outdoor nursing home, the place of absolute poverty filled with people lying around waiting for miracles of healing. They had come to the end of their rope, the end of their hope. This was a place of utter hopelessness for the sick, the disabled, the rejected, the poor. There was no festival happening here.

Archaeologists have uncovered this sink hole or reservoir that once formed this pool. On one of the walls of the portico, they also found a faded fresco picturing an angel stirring the water. You see in Jesus' time, when the water bubbled in this hole, the people thought it to be divine intervention, an angel stirring the water and whoever could jump in before the bubbling stopped would be healed.

Jesus is not at the temple. He's not in the dance line or at the buffet table. He is walking through these corridors of despair. He meets a man who has been sick for thirty-eight years; the Bible says a paralytic, the Greek word actually means one who is "dried out."

Jesus asks a simple question. For as much we have discovered these past few weeks that Jesus' teachings are not always clear and direct, he usually asks simple questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no." "Do you want to be made well?"

The man doesn't answer Jesus's question. He probably can't after thirty-eight years, the sense of defeat must be monumental. Why is Jesus' even bothering to ask? The man doesn't say "yes" or "no". He tells Jesus that he tries to make his way to the pool when it starts to bubble, but he can't get there. And there's no network of family or friends by his side to lift him into the pool.

Jesus doesn't remain with him to lift him into the pool once the water starts to bubble.

These people were desperately lying by this pool because they had learned that this was the only system available to help them. If they could get to that pool, the system would work, be the solution to their healing.

But Jesus bypasses a system that is doing no more than keeping sick people sick and poor people poor.

"Stand up, take up your mat and walk."

"Oh Jesus! Can you possibly wait just a few hours? It's the Sabbath you know, and you can only heal on the sabbath if it is life threatening. This man has been sick for thirty-eight years. He can wait a few more hours until sunset. Please hold off and don't violate the Sabbath."

In addition to taking on the health care system, Jesus just took on the religious system.

The religious notice this man walking towards the temple, "Hey buddy, what are you doing carrying your mat. That's work and it's the Sabbath! No work on the Sabbath."

"What do you mean you were made well? Who did that on the Sabbath?" The man didn't even know what to tell them. He didn't ask Jesus his name.

Now this may sound a little silly to us. But oh, it wasn't.

First century Judaism defined community identity around circumcision, food laws and sabbath observance. We can identify with this; think about an institution, a system that you have held so sacred that you are utterly appalled at anyone who dares to come up against it.

Jesus finally does make it to the temple and so does the man, probably for the first time in thirty-eight years.

So, the leaders are now going to discover who this was that healed on the Sabbath.

Jesus says to the man, "You're well. Do not sin anymore!" We need to be very clear that Jesus never associated sin as the reason for physical disease and affliction. He never linked sin and illness. This conversation with the man was Jesus affirming that his body was well, and Jesus also desired that his spirit be well also, that he go and live as full a life as was possible for him.

The man went and announced, proclaimed that this was the person who had brought him out of a system that was keeping him sick.

It's been misinterpreted that this man was throwing Jesus under the bus and turning Jesus in for violating Sabbath law. But that's not the spirit in any way of the original language. The man couldn't help himself. He had to announce, he had to proclaim- this was his salvation.

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So.....

877 miles from Annapolis, MD, about a 12-hour 45 minute drive, there's a town, Collirene, Alabama and a woman named Pamela Rush who lived there in a trailer. The majority of the residents of this town are people of color. This area is known as the Black Belt because the soil is dark and dense and at one time was perfect for cotton farming, which before the civil war brought a lot of wealth to the plantation owners.

But the soil isn't too good for much else, and the jobs in the area are few. It this has become one of the poorest counties in the poorest state in our country. But that's not all.

Wells are very hard to dig in this type of soil as are septic systems and there is a huge sewage problem.

Now, the state of Alabama mandates that anyone who is not on a municipal sewer line, which is 80% of the people living in the Black Belt, must invest in a waste management system.

That makes sense! It's a public health issue.

But conventional septic systems don't work because of the density of the soil. So, the state says, "Well, put in pipes that lead to a tank for sewage and then cover that tank with a mound of dirt. Well, this area also has a high-water table and when it rains the dirt often erodes and the sewage flows out or backs up into sinks, toilets and bathtubs.

In Alabama, not having a functioning septic system is a criminal misdemeanor. "That will be a \$500 citation, ma'am. You don't have the money? Sorry, you are going to have to come with me."

People get arrested for sewage violations. Installing a new system is around \$20,000 which is more than the average person makes in this county in a year. So, the residents in a desperate effort will often use piping from their house to the grass outside to dispose of the waste in their yards. It's called straight piping and it's not uncommon in much of rural America.

These residents are in a system that says it's giving them solutions, but the solutions are not accessible or affordable so they remain in these living conditions. And they are humiliated, made to feel like it's their fault and so embarrassed to bring any outsider in to see how they have to live when they know they are most likely to hear,

"Well, get a job that pays so you can buy a proper sewage system."

No one was assisting these people to the healing waters.

Pamela Rush, a resident of Colirene did bring in some outsiders and eventually made it to Washington to testify before Congress. She had to be walked out of the system to get the help she needed, the help that would give her and her children a chance to live a better life.

There is much more to this story, and it's ending is mixed with sadness and hope. Pamela had many health problems due to her environment and early in the pandemic she contracted COVID and died. But she's a hero in her community. Door after door was closed until she opened her private world, exposed herself and her home with all the smells and the dirt and showed what this disease of poverty really looks like.

Someone, some activists had to walk her out of a system that for years only kept her in a state of diseased living.

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We love our institutions, our systems and hold them sacred. I am called to serve as a minister of words and sacrament in an institution called the Presbyterian Church USA. I am grateful for the institutional structure, consider it a blessing to bear this tradition and have defended the polity.....except in those times and situations when the living God has revealed that the system is unjust and keeping people in their place when God intends for them to soar.

I am so thankful for the person who stood up and challenged the polity that women could not be ordained.

One of my most cherished mentors, such a wonderful pastor to his people, finally left the church back in the nineties because he's gay, and gays could not be ordained. "Just don't tell anyone," the people advised. It was devastating that they would lose him as their pastor.

He said how could he be a pastor to people and encourage them to live into their true selves when he had to put up a façade? It was twenty years of debate before the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church USA was changed, and people were convinced that this was in no way a "wiley niley" change.

There were consequences. People left the church, friendships ended, schism ensued. The church has lived through that before.

We honor our institutions, our systems. They can and should serve good and upstanding purposes, and we should defend them when it's appropriate.

But they do not have the ultimate say of God's activity in the world. Jesus looked at that pool and saw that it was only working to keep the sick people sick.

Jesus will bring God into human experiences in ways that will transcend our human definitions and categories.

And for what purpose?

Because Jesus wants us to be well, to live to our fullest potentials, to be given opportunities and open doors.

That doesn't mean a perfect body. We are not told that the man's body became perfect, restored to Olympic abilities. We are told that Jesus made it possible for him to be brought out of a system that was keeping him sick, without any hope or opportunity to live into wholeness, and his potential.

And after thirty-eight years, Jesus wasn't willing to wait until sunset- that's how much Jesus wanted wholeness for this person.

Our bodies are not perfect temples. Our bodies age. We are not always cured of disease. We have disabilities. There comes a time when our bodies can take no more, they will be done. These are realities.

But whatever limits there may be on our physical or mental being, Jesus' desire is that we can live to our potential, and what's in place are systems that support that. That's what it means to be well.

Jesus and the man are focusing on new possibilities for this man's life while the religious leaders are ranting about the challenge Jesus has just presented to the conventional order.  
"How dare he! Something must be done with him. We can't have this."

Despite the consequences,

Jesus says, "Rise! Take up your mat and walk!"

That has always conjured a very literal picture in my mind.

But maybe Jesus' words were not to be taken so literally.

Maybe it was Jesus' way of saying,

Make way!

Get ready for new possibilities.....

to thrive.....

to live.

God will not have it any other way.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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