

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE BEST KIND

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3) The Paralyzed Man

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Thus far in our Lenten journey, we have considered Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, the well-respected religious leader and the nameless Samaritan woman at the well. In both of these encounters, Jesus lifts up the importance of the Spirit of God—the Spirit that invited Nicodemus to experience a spiritual rebirth that never ends and the Spirit that invited the Samaritan woman to taste the living water of God's inclusive and accepting love. In the understanding of the author of John's Gospel, it is Jesus who brings light into the darkness. It is Jesus who enables the blind to see, both in a physical sense and in a spiritual sense. And it is the Spirit of God that is at work in him, inviting and enabling others to see as they have never seen before.

In our third "close encounter," Jesus' invitation takes a slightly different approach. John tells us that Jesus has gone up to Jerusalem for the purpose of participating in one of the many religious festivals. While there, he happened to pass a pool by the Sheep Gate, a pool with the name of "Bethzatha." In local lore, this pool had quite a reputation as a place of potential healing. Located over a subterranean spring, the placid surface of this pool would occasionally be disturbed by an underground release. Local people believed that this disturbance was evidence of an angel or spirit stirring up the water and that the first person to enter the pool after the disturbance would be healed of whatever infirmity they suffered from.

So, you can imagine that there was quite a contingent of those who longed to be made well ringing the side of the pool, just waiting for their chance to be healed. It was this precise hope that led the paralyzed man whom Jesus encounters, to wait by the side of the pool in hopes of being first in. The stunning thing, of course, was that this man had not been waiting a short time for this miracle moment to occur. In fact, the writer tells us that he had been waiting for 38 years! That is hard to imagine, isn't it? 38 years he had been waiting to be healed and the opportunity had never quite arrived.

I imagine that he had been close a few times, but then, at the last moment, someone else who perhaps had a little assistance from a friend or two, would plunge in just ahead of him. But he had no one to help him. And that is precisely what he told Jesus when Jesus approached him with a surprising and even preposterous question: Do you want to be made well?

Now, if this man was inclined to be a bit sarcastic, he could have responded by saying something like, "Not really, I'm just working on my tan!" And, quite frankly, we wouldn't blame him if he did. After all, what kind of question was that—"Do you want to be healed?" Would he have chosen to lay there for 38 years if he didn't want to be healed?

This question, however, was not really as insensitive as it may have first appeared. In fact, a strong case can be made to suggest that it was exactly the question that needed to be asked. Jesus needed to know just what the man's true desire was.

Notice that the man doesn't answer the question, however, with a "yes" or a "no." Instead, he answers the question with an excuse, a reason why he is in his current condition: "I have," he replied, "no one to help me get into the pool." I'm all by myself and am always edged out by those who have someone to help them.

He didn't say "yes" and he didn't say "no." Instead, he offered an excuse...one that he, no doubt, had used many, many times before...one that, no doubt, had elicited an outpouring of sympathy and financial support. In fact, that line might actually have become his "go to" line whenever he needed something from someone passing by who happened to notice him. It certainly could have enough of an impact upon others as to open up their purse strings and invite a compassionate and generous response—one that would provide enough to sustain him for a few days.

Once again, we can only speculate. But my speculation is that while this man didn't enjoy being an invalid lying by the pool, he had somehow grown accustomed to this routine of being the victim who was dependent upon the support of others. It's possible that his paralysis became his excuse for not living more fully or deeply.

Jesus, however, was not one to entertain excuses. Notice that Jesus doesn't offer a sympathetic ear. He doesn't shake his head in sadness over the man's story and he doesn't offer any pity. He didn't say, "O you poor thing!" Instead, he offers a command: **"Stand up, take your mat, and walk." Rather straight forward, don't you think? A three step command—stand, take, walk!**

And to the man's credit, he did!! If I was a betting man, I would have bet against the likelihood that he would have done so. Given his initial excuse, I would have bet that he would have found another reason not to respond to Jesus' command. I would have bet that he wasn't all that interested in being made well, that he would have been content to continue the routine of his past 38 years. And I would have been wrong!

John tells us that, "at once the man was made well and he took up his mat and began to walk." (John 5: 9) It must have been hard for him to believe! After lying there for 38 years, he suddenly finds himself standing! And then bending back down to pick up his mat, before trying out a few unsteady steps! Can you imagine the response of others who had been waiting there with him, trading stories and reasons and excuses all those years? They too, must have been beside themselves with surprise and wonder. He was walking!!!

Do you have that picture in your mind? If you can, you might want to "freeze frame" it for a moment, before we proceed with the story. There is a part 11 to this story that involves the religious authorities, but before we get to it, I would like to think with you about the implications that part 1 may hold for us and the way in which we choose to live our lives.

The key question in this brief encounter is, of course, "Do you want to be made well?" While it may seem like an obvious question, the answer is not necessarily so. The fact is that there are times in our lives in which we may not be exactly sure. Sometimes, being made well, brings with it a whole range of duties and responsibilities that we are not sure

that we are ready to embrace. William Sloane Coffin once observed that, ***“If it is hell to be guilty, it’s certainly scarier to be responsible—response able—able to respond to God’s call, able to respond to the love of Jesus.”***

He has a point. Sometimes, it is simply easier—less stressful and demanding—to rely upon our arsenal of excuses, our collections of reasons why we should be viewed as the victim and therefore, pitied—not prodded or challenged to change.

Our paralysis, you see, is not necessarily of a physical nature, but, more likely, of an emotional or spiritual nature. More often than not, the number one cause of our paralysis has to do with some form of fear. It is our fear, I believe, that, so often keeps us from standing up, taking up our mat and walking. It is our fear that can so easily keep us dependent upon our excuses, our reasons as to why we can’t do something. Sometimes, it is our fear of failure: What if I don’t succeed? What will people think? Better not to try in the first place...better not take the risk of falling flat on my face!

Sometimes, it is our fear of change and all that it will ask of us. After all, we might have to re-think, revise and even reverse our course in order to go forward. It is easier simply to ignore our need for change. That way, we can stay on our mats, without having to go through the painful process of change.

Sometimes, it is our fear of being overwhelmed by the weight of the world and all of its violence and injustice and pain. Rather than choosing to do something—anything—about it, we opt, instead, to tell ourselves that there is nothing that we can do for, after all, we are just one person.

And it is not only these fears that can impact individuals, but also, groups of individuals like congregations for example. Rather than realize their amazing potential to act and make a difference in the world, some congregations are content to merely talk the talk of faith without ever summoning the resolve to walk the walk. While this congregation is not one of those congregations, it is important for us to be aware of the danger of allowing our fears to paralyze us and our witness in the world.

I’m wondering, this morning, if there is some form of fear that might be paralyzing you—keeping you from taking the risk, venturing beyond your comfort level, stepping out in boldness to live the life, to do the work that God has set before you. While it is scary to be response able, it is only when we are willing to do so that we will discover the life that we long for, the life that we are called to live.

There is, however, more to this story than merely the encounter that Jesus has with this paralyzed man and the personal implications that it holds. There is also the encounter that Jesus has with the religious authorities and the social implications that it holds for those of us who are a part of the institutional church—organized religion, if you will.

It is after the man is made well that the writer notes that this event took place on the Sabbath. Uh-oh! Trouble is ‘a brewin!’ That, of course, was a “no-no” in the operations

manual of the religious authorities and they want to know just how this man managed to get well on the Sabbath. “Who was it,” they want to know, “who made you well?”

The man, however did not know, who it was that made him well. Unlike the first two encounters we have considered in this Lenten series, this man appears to have little interest in Jesus himself and does not have a particular need to tell others about him. It is later, after Jesus finds him in the temple that the man learns that it was Jesus who healed him. He then goes to the religious authorities and lets them know that it was Jesus who performed this work. It is then, the writer of John’s gospel tells us, that, “The Jews (religious authorities) began persecuting Jesus because he was doing such things on the Sabbath.” (John 5: 16)

This would prove to be the initial skirmish in a pitched battle that would lead up to the crucifixion. Jesus however, is quite clear that, “My father is still working and I am working.” He would not be dissuaded from his task—no matter how deep the conflict or how great the threat.

To put it rather succinctly, the religious authorities seemed to believe that they and they alone would be the final arbiters of the way God could conceivably be at work in the world. They would determine for everyone else the precise boundaries within which God chose to operate. And, from their viewpoint, those boundaries were clearly defined by their law and tradition. Those who violated the law or disregarded tradition—as Jesus did by healing on the Sabbath—were clearly operating outside of those boundaries...clearly “coloring outside the lines” of the way God was at work in the world.

Gail O’Day, writing in the Interpreter’s Bible Commentary on the Gospel of John, observes that the authorities rejection of Jesus was, in effect, ***“A rejection of the possibility of new and unprecedented ways of knowing God and ordering the life of faith.”***

This makes me wonder about the ways in which we who are a part of the organized religion we know as the Church, may be tempted to do the same. Is it possible that we are blind to the new ways in which God is at work in our own time and place? Is it possible that we have become so set, so rigid in keeping our own traditions that we cannot allow for the work of the One who is making all things new?

Your assignment in the week ahead is to reflect upon the ways that God’s Spirit is “coloring outside the lines” of the boxes that we have, too often, used to hold God captive. Where is there fresh evidence of the ways in which the Spirit of God is working? In what ways might we need to rethink and revise our approach to faith in order to allow for that work to take place?

I do believe, without question, that God is at work and that we are called to share in the work that God is doing. Our response may involve the choice to face down our fear and take the risk of standing, taking up our mat and walking. And it may also involve our choice to recognize that God will not be kept, God will not be confined, and God will not be limited to the narrow definitions that we may try to impose upon God. God, you see, is bigger than our boundaries, greater than our borders, and larger than our limitations. God is doing a new thing and I pray that we will have eyes to see it, ears to hear it, and hearts to embrace it with courage and conviction. **Amen.**