

ROUGH EDGES

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The Jews said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the Sabbath. It is against the law for you to carry your bed.' He answered, 'The man who cured me, he told me, "Take up your bed and walk.'" (John 5:10-11)

Back in old Jerusalem, down by the Sheep Gate, there was a pool that was called Bethesda. Now this was no ordinary pool. Folks used to say that from time to time angel of God came down and turned it into a health spa.

A lot of sick and hurting people came to this pool, because it was said that if you were the first one in when the water got stirred up, you would be healed of whatever ailed you. It got to be something like a first-century "run for the roses" with everyone dashing for the pool as soon as the celestial lifeguard blew the whistle. But in this case, it was not "last one in is a rotten egg" but "first one in gets the heavenly prize." Needless to say, that pool was more crowded than the beaches on July 1st weekend.

Now there was a man named Ephraim who had been sick for thirty-eight years. As Jesus was passing by the pool, he noticed the man and knew that he had been there for a long time. He knew he shouldn't heal the man – it was the Sabbath after all, and it would be against all those blue laws. But he did decide to pay the man a pastoral call on the man, so he went over to say hi.

Except Jesus was never one to make small talk. The first thing he said was "Do you want to be made well?"

The man didn't know who Jesus was, but he was happy for the company. He told Jesus he wanted to be made whole, but had discovered he couldn't do it on his own. He kind of hoped someone would come along and intercede for him.

Now, Ephraim was sure that this nice man was going to stick around and help him when the water got all stirred up. But Jesus surprised him by passing up the race for the pool altogether. Instead he gave him a simple command.

"Pick up your bed and walk, then," he said.

And the man did!

But there was a problem. It was the Sabbath and there was to be no carrying-on on holidays. In fact, there was not to be any carrying of anything. There were some folks there who let it be known that they were not pleased.

"You're carrying things too far," these people said.

"The healing?" the man replied.

"No, the pallet. Who told you to do that?"

"It's not my fault. He told me to."

Well, it wasn't long before the healed man met up with Jesus again – in the temple. Jesus said, “You really showed you new character when you carried that bed, but remember – getting rid of your sinful ways doesn't stop with getting rid of the pallet.”

But Ephraim did not understand. He kept the healing, but turned in the healer. He didn't know there was more to being well than walking.

Last weekend, I had the privilege of being at the Northern Region Event – it's what we do when there is no annual meeting of the Conference. The folks from Yellowhead, Edmonton and Northern Lights Presbyteries put together this wonderful weekend for anyone in the Northern Region who wanted to come. They arranged to have Janet Wolfe come and speak. Janet is dynamic preacher from Tennessee who has a marvelous way with words and can really get into a Bible Story. This happens to be the story she got into with us on Saturday morning. She asked us to choose who we might be in the story. Some folks chose to be Ephraim, some folks chose to be the group of disabled people gathered at the pool, some chose to be the religious authorities and some chose to be Jesus. Then we had to talk about ourselves in the story. Following is some of what was shared.

I am one of the groups of invalids. I come here because I have such hope. I have faith that one day it will be my turn. I will make it to the pool when the water gets stirred up. If I was really honest I would say that I come here too because we are all the same and I am accepted here. We are some of the outcasts of society. We are looked upon as worthless, not earning our place, being a burden on our society. This is a safe place to gather until we make it to the pool or our health care system is improved and we can get the treatment we need for our disability.

I am Ephraim. I have been coming to this place for thirty-eight years. It's an okay place to be. Like all the others that come, I'm accepted here. Nobody looks at me funny. We are all the same. I've been waiting and waiting to get to that pool. I always hoped somebody would help me get there, but they all run past me, over me until the other day. This man asked me if I wanted to be healed. What fool would say no. It was great to pick up my mat and walk and then came the questions. What do you think you are doing? It's the Sabbath. You can't do any carrying on the Sabbath. I wasn't taking the blame for this. No way. So I told them about the man. Wouldn't you know it, I ran into him and he told me I had to change so nothing worse would happen to me. Do you suppose he's telling me I need to witness now. Like go and tell that I believe. I had faith and it made me well. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if this being made well was such a great thing. I will have to go out into the world now. I will have to go out now and witness. Make new friends. I think I'll just go tell the religious authorities it was Jesus who made me well.

I am the religious authorities. I have worked so hard to know all the rules and to follow all the rules. Now look at this. Along comes this fellow who has been cured and he's carrying his mat and this has all happened on the Sabbath. What does he think he's doing? And then he tells us later that it was this Jesus that cured him and on the Sabbath no less. There are six other days in the week to do this. Why today? Could you tell me that? Why today? This Jesus has been doing other weird things too. He talked to

Nicodemus about being born again, he talked to a woman and what's even worse, she's a Samaritan of questionable background babbling on about some living water.

And now this. He isn't even ordained or commissioned to ministry. What is going on in his head? We are going to have to do something about this. He talks like he is equal to God. Heresy, that's what it is. It's heresy. This has got to be stopped. No one is equal to God.

I am Jesus. There is a lot I could say but you know my story. You hear some of it each time you come here. If you know my story, you know I do God's work out on the street as well as in the Temple. I'm not choosy about who I spend my time with. Everyone is a child of God and equal in God's eyes. I really have some difficulty with those rules. If I follow them, they exclude people, they create a hierarchy, and there is judgment just to name a few struggles I see. I know I ask people to make difficult choices but to know God, to have faith, to do the work we are called to do by God requires making hard choices. It's getting me in hot water with those religious authorities but I'm not going to stop what I'm doing. I wonder if those religious authorities make all those rules so they don't have to make the hard choices.

By having us do this Bible Study in this particular way, Janet helped us recognize the rough edges of the gospel. She went on to talk about how we as religious leaders have chosen to smooth out the edges of the gospel.

Jesus takes the initiative and asks the question that sets the tone for this story. "Do you want to get well?" The question leaps off the page and becomes a question for every reader of John.

There is an important interaction here between the question of Jesus, the excuse of the lame man, and the subsequent healing command of Jesus.

The question, "Do you want to get well?" is a question addressed not just to the lame man, but also to any person seeking spiritual healing. The choice that is offered is whether one will continue to chase popular remedies or whether one will respond to the word of Jesus. The lame one makes his choice, responds in faith and experiences healing as a result.

Yet he has only begun his faith journey, and now he must deal with the implications of his decision. For with the same command with which he secured healing, he also, by taking up his bed, disobeyed the Sabbath law. So Jesus' directive to step out in faith included a step into a more radical religious identity. That is what it means to be made "well"; it means to boldly step out along a new religious path. But such actions can get one into trouble.

Living out the gospel, the gospel with rough edges can get us into trouble.

This story contrasts three religious paths. The path of the invalid is a short sighted one; he willingly accepts the healing of the moment, but shrinks from the commitment it takes to continue in a life of wholeness. The path of the enemies of Jesus is one that is bound by rules and restrictions, so much so that they no longer have access to "life." The path of Jesus is a path of wholeness and life. It is not an easy path. We know that. When the church chooses to use its prophetic voice and speaks out against that which is not life giving and threatens the quality of life and well being for all people,

we know how difficult that path can be. I cite the examples of the church's prophetic voice in the issues of Intensive Livestock Operations and the Casino campaign as difficult paths to walk.

Following the path of Jesus does bring new life but not without conflict. But it is a new quality of life that can be rich and rewarding.

So this morning, I invite us all to think about who we are in the story? Are we one of the lame or blind or disabled gathered round the pool and what is it that is disabling us? Are we the lame one healed, called to do the scary work of talking about our faith? Are we the religious authorities trying to control with rules and regulations?

Are we followers of Jesus ready to step outside the lines, practice religion in a bold new way? Are we ready to boldly step out along a new religious path, a path that embraces the gospel with all its rough edges?