

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

This month, February, is the time every year when we celebrate black history in Canada. That history goes back 200 years. I encourage you to read the stories of black people coming and settling in Canada – which was initially to escape slavery in the US. There is much information on the Government of Canada website. I’ll provide the link in this sermon.¹

We know that any person who is different from us, is, by some people, treated differently and sometimes experiences discrimination. Jesus, however, did not discriminate on any grounds, but responded to all marginalized people in the same way. That is, with compassion.

We see this in today’s gospel reading. Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem from Galilee for a festival. He passed by the Sheep Gate into the city where there was a pool, called Bethesda, (or Bethsaida). The pool had five porches, and most likely these were columns with roofs on top to provide shelter. Many invalids were sitting around the pool waiting for it to bubble up. It was thought that an Angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons and stirred up the water, and whoever stepped in first, after the stirring, was healed from whatever disease they had.

To us that may sound a bit far-fetched, but even now, there are still spas where people go to be healed, such as Lourdes in France or the shrine of Guadalupe in Mexico City. The pool of Bethesda was like those, an intermittent spring where water is released in surges causing the springs to rise and fall suddenly. That gave rise to the superstition in Bethesda about an angel troubling the water.

So out of all the people at the side of the pool, Jesus chooses to talk to one man. He is ill and has been at the pool for 38 years, so now he’s an old man for those times. We are not told what his illness is, but it causes mobility issues. It means that he cannot get into the water quickly enough to be the first after it’s stirred up, because he needs someone to carry him in. And so, he has not been healed. It seems he feels it is his only hope for healing, which clearly, he wants. If he was content with his situation, and resigned to a life of begging, he would have been better off sitting near the temple.

First Jesus asks the man, “Do you want to be made well?” This situation is different from other accounts of Jesus healing, where it is the sick person who asks Jesus to heal them. Clearly the man knows nothing about Jesus and his ability to heal. This is borne out when the man says later in the temple, that he did not know who healed him. The healer simply disappeared into the crowd afterwards, and did not give his name.

The sick man in this story does not reply directly to Jesus’ question if he wants to be healed. It probably seems obvious to the man – of course he does. He replies, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” The man believes and trusts that the pool will heal him. But even though he has been trying to get into it for 38 years, he’s not quick enough.

Jesus does not even touch the man. He simply says, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” Then Jesus quickly leaves without saying anything else. The healed man must have gone straight to the temple to give thanks, as he still has his mat with him when he enters the temple. Then of course he gets into trouble from the Jewish authorities for carrying his mat. We might say that’s legalism gone too far.

The last part of the story is that Jesus also went to the temple and met the healed man, who was then able to identify him to the Jewish authorities. For someone who had been sitting immobile around a pool for 38 years, he would have been totally ignorant of the consequences of doing that. He likely had no idea that Jesus was already getting into trouble with the Jewish hierarchy, and this Sabbath healing would make things worse.

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/black-history-month.html>

What are we to make of this healing?

I had many questions as I read this gospel story. Maybe you did too?

- Why didn't Jesus heal everyone at the pool?
- Why choose this one man?
- Why does Jesus heal?

It seems that Jesus is sending a message, and it's not just to do with the physical healing. It's about who he is.

This reading is from the gospel of John, and because of that, we can find the answers to some of these questions. For John, the miracles of Jesus are signs. John's gospel describes who Jesus Christ is and what he did, and reveals the heavenly nature of Jesus, as the living expression of God. The primary purpose of Jesus' miracles was to show who he is. That is, the promised Messiah; and his miracles are ‘signs’ that confirm his identity. It wasn't necessary then for Jesus to heal everyone at the pool – only one healing was needed to show his power and compassion. That was all that was needed to show his true identity. He knew that the knowledge of his power would spread, as it did here and in his other healings. But his main purpose was not to be a miracle doctor, but to show that he is the Messiah, the Son of God who has come to redeem all people and bring in the Kingdom of God. He also shows us that in that new Kingdom, there will be justice and compassion for all.

All those who experienced healing from Jesus told others about it. Even though at Jesus' first healing he said, ‘tell no-one.’ It's likely that this man who was healed, would also tell others of his miraculous healing by Jesus. We don't know what happened to him, but maybe he became one of Jesus' followers, or at least a believer.

What is it to be a believer? It's different from saying we have faith, which is a static and fixed position. Being a believer is an active thing – believing is a verb. It's like loving someone – we choose to love on a continual basis. John's gospel always describes the continual act of belief as believing. He never uses the word ‘faith.’

The man at the pool believes he will be healed. Only he thinks it will be from the pool waters, when in fact it is Jesus who will heal him. And it will change his life forever.

To be a believer then, is important; because that is what we are as Christians, believers. We recite the Creed every week in this way. We say in the Apostles Creed,

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.”

We could say, ‘I have faith in God.’ But believing is something we do every day, as an active response to Christ loving us. What made you a believer in Christ? Was it through a miracle or a gradual coming to know and love Jesus? Did someone else tell you about Jesus? These are questions it's worth thinking about, because we can tell others about Jesus. Our baptismal covenant asks all of us, ‘Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?’ We reply, ‘I will, with God's help.’

Has believing changed your life? I know it has changed mine.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN