

The Passover Feast

14th Sunday after Trinity - John 5:1-16

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. 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. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 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?”

“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.”

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

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

But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’ “

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

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

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.” The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

The Lord had given his Old Testament people seven feasts. The purposes of these feasts were to set before the people the great deeds of God for their salvation. The greatest of these feasts was the Passover Feast. This feast graphically reminded the Jews of their separation unto the Lord from all other nations by the blood of the Paschal Lamb. This feast was a reminder of their redemption from Egyptian slavery by the mighty outstretched hand of the Lord.

At the same time every one of these feasts pointed the people to the Lord in whom these figurative feasts would reach their fulfillment. They were always called the Feasts of the Lord for he had prepared them for his people that they might feast on his mercy and rejoice in his goodness.

However, in our text we read: **Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews.** A feast of the Jews - that pretty well describes the spiritual deterioration which had taken place in the Old Testament church. The original feasts of the Lord gradually had been de-spiritualized into mere 'Feasts of the Jews'. In celebrating these feasts, the Jews no longer commemorated the great things which the Lord had done for them in the past and was continuing to do for them in the present time. Instead they were wholly taken up with themselves and with their own thoughts and their own righteousness. In the worship of their hearts they no longer recounted the Lord's mercies, which would have put a new song upon their lips. Instead they rehashed the vain boasting of a self-righteous heart. With all their right form of worship, their orthodox separatism, their stress on pure doctrine

and their strict observance of the Laws of Moses, they had actually lost the glory of the Lord. The Lord's Feast had become a Feast of the Jews. It was the worship of self rather than the worship of God.

And this can very easily happen to us as well when the mercies of God no longer occupy and overwhelm our hearts. Then the Lord gets away from us and our worshiping is inward with only thoughts of ourselves. Consider the feast days which we have in the New Testament. Take, for example, the Sunday Feast - It is the Lord's Day. It is the day in which he rose from the dead and brought life and immortality to us. Every Sunday he calls us to this Feast which he has prepared for us by his triumph over death and the grave. He prepares a table before us, laden with the gifts of grace. Here we may eat that which is good and let our souls delight in it. And when this goodness of the Lord no longer occupies our hearts so that we are impelled to congregate and sing his praise, then the Lord's Day, and every other day of our life, has been desecrated into one of "our own days". These days we are only occupied with ourselves and our own thoughts and purposes, there is no Lord's Day.

This pitiful spiritual state of the Jews was portrayed by an outward situation. Close by the temple there was a pool with five porches surrounding it, where people with all sorts of sicknesses and diseases came with the hope of being cured in the healing waters of the pool. While the Jews celebrated their feast there were a great multitude of infirmed people at their very door. Here in truth was a portrayal of their inner state and of the state

of the whole nation, and even of the entire world. They were all helpless and in the power of sin and death. They were blind and could not see the light of heaven and rejoice in it. They were halt and withered, not one had the strength to stand on his own feet and walk in the way of righteousness.

What reason had these Jews to keep a feast day and to celebrate with a great multitude of infirmed people at their gate? What cause for feasting had they when their own eyes were blinded and the strength of their heart was withered away? What reason have we to rejoice and to celebrate with millions of infirmed people at our gate and with paralyzing helplessness in our own hearts? It is all a mockery; it's all a sham and a self-delusion.

And yet the Jews to this very day had reason to feast and to celebrate and to rejoice with joy unspeakable, even as we hear that: **Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews.** In his unfathomable mercy, he came to the 'Feast of the Jews'. He came to the pool of Bethesda and made it truly the "House of Mercy". Matthew 21:5 says: **Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, ...'** And he comes through the sheep-gate, where the sacrificial animals were brought into the city and were kept to be sold to the worshippers. All of you infirmed people take note: John 1:29 - **"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** He comes to lay himself upon the altar, so that he might seek and save that which is lost. He comes to open the eyes of the blind and to make the lame walk, to make the deaf hear and bring life to the dying.

One would think that his coming would create a great stir among the infirmed people. But it is true as the Baptist had testified in John 1:26: **... but among you stands one you do not know.** They knew him not. The power of sin not only ripples and eventually kills our bodies, but it ruins our souls and blinds our hearts so that we cannot even know the Lord of glory when he draws near to us. Jesus walks among the infirmed people and not one raises his voice and cries for mercy. Their eyes are upon the mineral spring, waiting for its spasmodic bubbling forth.

We do not approach the Lord but he must approach us, or we will forever remain in our helplessness. In his mercy Jesus singles out a certain man who had an infirmity of 38 years. To him he says: **“Do you want to get well?”** This was spoken to arrest his attention, to take his eyes off the pool and to look upon the face of his Savior. Jesus then said: **“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”** **At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.** Here we see the power of the living Word. It is the same creative Word which in the beginning said in Genesis 1:3: **And God said: “Let there be light,” and there was light;** which said in John 11:43: **Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, ...”** it is the same eternal Word which was made flesh and dwelt among us and we read in I John 4:9: **This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.** This is Jesus coming to the Feast of the Jews. He comes to bring life and salvation, to make every sinner whole in body, soul, and spirit. He comes to restore the feast of the Jews to a feast of the Lord

by giving people beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.

Just so the Lord approaches us. So he raises us up by his Word and gives us strength to walk in the new life of faith. In our worship at home and in church, in every sermon, the Lord draws near to us through his creative Word to give us new life and strength. He fills our hearts with his goodness and mercy. And whenever we worship or partaking of the Lord's Supper – we are receiving of the Lord anew. Our Feast of the Lord is not a dead wearisome thing but life giving.

And he that was made whole stood up and walked. He walked, as every true Israelite only can walk, in the strength of the living Word. And being made whole he went to the temple to keep the feast day. For now this man must worship, must shout out praise, and with thanksgiving he must burst forth in song.

In this life of praise, Jesus again draws near to him and reveals himself more fully, strengthening this new life by admonishing him: **Behold, thou are made whole: sin no more lest a worse thing come unto thee.** Herein is the admonition of the Gospel that we make our calling and election sure by the obedience of faith. For a worse thing than physical infirmity befalls one upon whom the grace of God has been bestowed in vain. The danger of willfully sinning against the grace of God strikes fear and trembling into every believer's heart, alerts him or her and spurs them on in this quest for sanctification.

Our text says: **The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”** Of course it is the always the Sabbath Day every day of the week when the Lord in his mercy draws near to the infirmed people and raises them up to a new life. That’s why the Sabbath Day was originally given to people, so that they may cease from selfish thoughts and direct their eyes upon the works of the Lord.

Here we see the religionist at work: People who have religion, but not Christ - people who in their blind impenitence look at their own works and build their own righteousness. They see this man carrying his bedroll on the Sabbath and that’s all they can see. They can’t see the miracle of grace, because they have sealed and steeled their hearts against the grace of God. They don’t want to feast on the Lord and his marvelous works, but they want to feast on their own glory and their own deeds. They always resist the Holy Ghost because he reprovess them in their unrighteousness, he lays bare their nakedness and shame. Who will fathom the mystery of sin which refuses the gift of God? It is enough for us to know the grace of God which has overpowered our stubborn, hardened hearts and brought us at our Savior’s feet.

Now the Jews wanted to kill Jesus. A judgment happens when Light comes into the world but sinners preferred darkness. Quietly and patiently Jesus answered them in John 5:17: **Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”** There is no inactivity in God. Since

creation, the Father too has ceaselessly worked. Also Jesus in the flesh works here and now, on the Sabbath as well as on any other day in order to seek and save that which is lost.

As we today approach the feast of the Lord's Supper let us bear in mind that Jesus goes with us up to this feast. He is himself present with his Word, his body and blood. Jesus speaks these words in Mark 2:5: **When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."** As soon as the words are spoken, the paralytic is immediately made whole and cleansed of all sin. Jesus says in our text today: **"See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."**

Let us not be guilty of receiving the grace of God in vain. Let us now live the new life in Christ. Let us serve him and avoid all that is sinful or an offense to Christ, our Savior.

**When Jesus comes, - Oh blessed story!
He works a change in heart and life;
God's kingdom comes with power and glory
To young and old, to man and wife.
Through Sacrament and living Word,
Faith, love and hope are now conferred.**

Pastor Arvid G.W. Gullerud