***CAN’T SEE THE FOREST FOR THE TREES***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Text: John 5:1-18

When I was in college, I took an art history course in the hopes of being less clueless and a little more appreciative of the wonder of the art world. (Thank God for a pass/fail option!) The course embraced architecture, sculpture, ceramics, paintings, and other art forms across the centuries. Through the course, I came to appreciate what artists were trying to do in their work, rather than just judging whether I liked the end result or not – though there were some artists whose work never did make sense to me, and in the end, I still believe that *beauty is in the eye of the beholder*! Among the painting styles we studied was something called pointillism. It is a painting technique in which individual dots of color are applied in a pattern to create an image. The closer you stand to the painting the harder it is to recognize the image and the more it looks like just a bunch of dots. Pointillism demands that you take a few steps away from the painting and take in the whole rather than focusing on the individual dots. Only then does the image become clear. It is akin to that familiar expression: *you can’t see the forest for the trees*.

Oddly, that lesson in pointillism came to mind as I was studying this story in John’s gospel about the healing of the paralyzed man and the subsequent dispute with the Jewish leaders. For, the religious leaders seemed so focused on points of the law that they missed completely the point of Jesus’ healing, and perhaps it was in part because they were just too close to it all.

As John tells it, this whole encounter was initiated by Jesus. The paralyzed man had been unable to walk for 38 years, meaning that his condition was more or less permanent. His desperate hope in lying by the pool was that in those moments when the waters were stirred up, he might slip in and find healing for his dead legs, for rumor was that the waters, when stirred, had healing powers. That is where Jesus found him – lying by the pool in hopes that the waters might heal him. When Jesus approached, the man had no idea who he was; he did not call out to Jesus or ask Jesus to perform a miracle for him as others had done. The man had done nothing to demonstrate faith in Jesus, and the text offers no character reference for him as a righteous man. He was just an unnamed, long-suffering paralyzed man who Jesus chose to make well after first asking, “Do you want to be made well?”

It is an odd question, even from the Son of God! One can imagine a sassier character responding with a snarky comment like, “*No, why would I want to be made well? It is too much fun dragging myself here and hanging around this pool all day with all the other cripples!*” But instead, the paralyzed man paints a picture of his desperate frustration – he can never get to the waters when they are astir with healing bubbles. Someone always beats him there, for he is alone and has no one to help him. Perhaps he thinks Jesus will take pity on him and offer a helping hand the next time the waters are astir. What he does not expect, imagine, or dare to hope is what Jesus offers – not healing waters, not a healing touch – just healing words: “*Stand up, take your mat, and walk*.”

In the story of creation in Genesis 1, God speaks all things into being. *God said, “Let there be light!” and there was light. God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so.* God speaks and stuff happens. The spoken word itself produces the action. So it was for Jesus who bears the power and authority of God. He speaks, “*Stand up, take your mat, and walk*,” and the man stood, took up his mat, and walked. There was healing power in those words as Jesus spoke healing into being.

In most miracle stories, the healing is cause for celebration. Those who are healed express faith in Jesus or glorify God or tell their neighbors who are drawn to Jesus in droves. But in this instance, the healing attracts little attention, except from the Jewish authorities who note that the newly healed man is violating the law. The paralyzed man does not know who healed him; he knows only what he tells the Jewish leaders: this man said, “*Stand up, take your mat, and walk*.” And the man did as he was told; for the first time in 38 years, he stood and walked. It was not the standing or walking that the Jewish leaders objected to; it was carrying the mat. The law of Moses made clear that the Sabbath was to be a day of rest in which no work was to be done. Those who violated that law were to be put to death; in the 15th chapter of Numbers there is a story of a man found gathering sticks on the Sabbath who was stoned to death by the people for doing that meager work. By the first century, stoning was no longer so rigorously enforced, but ostracism and condemnation from the religious leaders was. They interpreted the Sabbath law strictly and literally – not unlike some of the Taliban in Afghanistan today. In their eyes, carrying that mat violated the law.

What is lacking in the response of the religious leaders is any appreciation or wonder for the healing itself. Here was a man who had been unable to walk for almost four decades who was suddenly, miraculously healed. Instead of rejoicing in his healing or attributing it to the hand of God or inquiring about the healing gifts of the unknown healer, the Jewish leaders object to the miracle as a violation of the Sabbath law, and blame the one who dared to heal on the Sabbath and to urge the paralyzed man to break it as well by saying, “Take up your mat.” What a missed opportunity to appreciate the power of God at work and to consider the possibility that Jesus might be somehow special in God’s work!

Before we condemn those leaders too harshly for their legalistic ways, we might consider our own checkered history. In his book *A Brief History of Sunday*, Justo Gonzalez writes:

*In Boston, in 1656, a certain Captain Kemble, just returning from a three-year voyage, was met by his wife at the doorstep of his house, and kissed her. But this happened to be Sunday, and the unfortunate sailor was condemned to two hours of humiliation in the public stocks for his public display of lewdness on the Sabbath!*[[1]](#endnote-1)

Shocking! Within the last century blue laws forbade a host of practices on the Sabbath from shopping to playing cards to showing movies. There was a time in the not so distant past when everyone was expected to wear their Sunday best to church, and those who didn’t risked a jaded eye from other church-going folks. Times change, and sometimes religious traditions are slow to change with them, so we should be cautious in condemning too harshly those Jewish leaders who saw a clear violation of the Sabbath law in the man carrying his mat. Perhaps we might do better to commit to avoid repeating their mistake!

It is possible that the story would have ended there with the healing of the paralyzed man and chastisement from the Jewish leaders, but once again Jesus took the initiative to seek him out. That is how God works – taking the initiative to reach out to us even when we do not reach out to God, loving us even when we do not love God. As Paul writes, *it was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us.* God does not wait for us to find God; God finds us. Jesus did not wait for the healed man to find him; Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “*See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you!*” Jesus’ words suggest the man was in need of healing for his soul as much as for his body. Jesus had healed his body, but he did not neglect his soul. The man now knew who was the source of his healing for both. It was that awareness that led him to share with the Jewish leaders, literally to *announce* to them, that it was Jesus who had healed him. In so doing he was not betraying Jesus, but sharing what he considered good news about the man who had healed him.

The religious authorities did not share his perspective. They were still so focused on the points of the law that they missed the larger point of Jesus’ identity. When he revealed it to them in declaring that his healing work on the Sabbath was like his Father’s ongoing work, they began to persecute him and plan to kill him, for they perceived him as a threat. He was a threat to their authority, a threat to their legalistic perspective, a threat to their understanding of who the messiah would be. In some ways Jesus is a threat to us and our comfort as well; he is a threat to our conscience and comfortable way of life at the expense of our third-world neighbors, a threat to any nationalism that would place love of nation ahead of love for our neighbors in the world, a threat to greed that justifies selfish pursuits, a threat to our creation of a Christianity that satisfies our wants instead of God’s wants for us. The Jewish leaders were never able to see the forest, because they were so focused on each individual tree of the law. Can we do better? Can we step back and see the bigger picture, the global picture, the faithful picture of God’s love for the world in the risen Christ?

After two thousand years, we have the benefit of a broader perspective shared by generations of saints. We have the opportunity to step back from the portrait of Jesus painted by the gospel writers and see the bigger picture of who Jesus was and is – the Son of God, the savior of the world, the healer of our every ill, the long-awaited Messiah of God, the risen Lord. Do you see him in that bigger picture or are you still stuck on the individual points of a Christian religion as you have comfortably understood it? Are you open to a new perspective on the Lord who is more interested in us loving and serving our neighbors than judging our neighbors, more interested in us doing justice than observing tradition, more interested in us welcoming the stranger than sticking to the letter of the law? For, it is a beautiful picture Christ paints for us if we can just see beyond the dots! It is a beautiful forest if we can just see beyond the trees! Amen

1. Justo L. González, *A Brief History of Sunday*, Eerdmans Publishing:2017, p.138 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)