

Poolside healing: John 5:1-9

by [Mary Hinkle Shore](#) in the [May 1, 2007](#) issue

In John 5, festival scenes in the holy city are juxtaposed with the view of five porticoes full of invalids. Imagine dropping by the nursing home on your way to Christmas Eve services. One place is festive, filled with pretty clothes, color, light and music. The other location features crutches, canes and people who cannot hide their desperate need for healing.

Amid these contrasting scenes, we find Jesus with those who need a physician. In one of the porticoes, he strikes up a conversation with a man who has been ill for 38 years. The man is lying beside a pool whose waters are rumored to have healing properties, yet he cannot get to the water. Living with healing just out of reach has become a way of life for him.

In his answer to Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" we hear defensiveness. Is he used to being blamed for his own illness? Does he hear in Jesus' query the suggestion that he should try harder, think positively, be proactive? The man graciously enlightens the stranger on the scarcity of resources in this particular long-term-care facility. "Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me" (John 5:7). Of course he wants to be made well; otherwise he would not keep making regular trips to the pool. It is through no fault of his own that he is still sick, thank you very much. He is making the best of an impossible situation.

However, like Nicodemus and the woman at the well before him—and like Mary and Martha after him—this man is caught in one of those conversations with Jesus that is not about what it seems to be about. The man thinks they are talking about the pool, about how many people are elbowing each other toward the water and about how hopeless his case is. Meanwhile, Jesus is talking not about illness but about healing. Jesus is talking not about the circumstances of the man's long days at the edge of the pool but about his taking up his mat and walking. Jesus directs him thus, and the man does as he is told.

Notice what is not here. There is no request for healing in this story. The only question comes from Jesus. The man does not reach out to Jesus for help or otherwise request healing. We have no indication that the man knows Jesus to be a healer—or that he knows anything at all about Jesus except that Jesus asks personal questions of strangers. The writer of Ephesians praises God “who is able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (3:20). This is the God whom Jesus reveals here. The man at the pool does not ask and could not have imagined the event as it unfolds.

Also missing from this story is any mention of faith. Neither what the man believes nor where he places his trust ever comes up. In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus “sees the faith” of some friends who bring a paralytic to him, and he acts to heal the paralyzed man, eventually saying almost the same words: “Take up your mat and walk.” But the healing in John 5 includes nothing about believing. All we hear from this man is that although he has learned not to expect the system to meet his needs, he keeps returning to the pool, maybe because a slim chance of healing is better than none. Later, when the same man is asked to identify the one who healed him, he cannot. He cannot even point to Jesus because Jesus has melted into the crowd. The man will eventually make a testimony to Jesus’ work, but this happens long after the healing itself.

Finally, in this healing story, alongside a pool known for its healing waters as well as its queue of cutthroat invalids and expanse of long-term residents, we have a healing with no pool, no lines, no waiting. After 38 years of being ill, this man’s waiting is over. The time of healing is now. There is no waiting for the water to be stirred, for a turn in line, or even for the sun to go down on the sabbath so that the healing of a chronic condition is not controversial. Jesus speaks to the man, and the man picks up his mat and walks. There is more to the story, but most of it can be summarized with Jesus’ explanation of his actions: “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”

The church reads this story on the edge of our celebration of the ascension. Eventually, as time stretched on between the ascension of Christ and his return for judgment, the church would develop various ways of accounting for the delay and encouraging the people of God in the midst of it. For example, New Testament writers remind their readers that what readers perceive as the Lord’s slowness is actually patience so that none will perish (2 Pet. 3:8-10), and that their waiting—no matter how long—should be characterized by watchfulness (Mark 13:35-37 and

parallels).

Yet here on the cusp of the church's liturgical reenactment of watching the risen Jesus go, and in the midst of our real waiting for God to bring healing to the world and our lives, it is a good thing to see that someone's dream was not impossibly deferred. At the pool, Jesus is unaffected by realities of scarcity and arguments that God's work should be put off to a future time. Here, Jesus sees a need and acts on it, and in a quick moment, one long-sick man moves from waiting to walking.