

Decide and do: John 5:1-9

by [Ron Hansen](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

At one time I volunteered at an annex to a church where we collected mail for the homeless, dispensed sandwiches and snacks, helped with health issues, job hunting and so on. Sometimes the work was heartbreaking: pregnant women seeking a cookie and juice for their famished toddlers; a formerly beautiful woman so filthy, reeking and insane that people backed away from her; an old, impoverished Asian couple who showed up every Thursday to get a grocery bag of food from us that could not possibly have been enough for a week. And there was an afternoon when I heard a fully grown man weeping over the telephone as he begged his father for \$200 to buy a suit for his job interview, only to see that same man later naked but for a police raincoat and so high on methamphetamines that the police were afraid of any contact with his skin for fear of getting addicted themselves. All you could do was pray for those people.

But what was frustrating to me were the sane, young, vital, healthy men who seemed to have chosen a life of hovels and handouts and scams. I had just read an article in our California newspaper about a factory town in Nebraska that was desperate for workers, and I mentioned the possibility of that to a regular at “The Window.” And he said, “Oh, I couldn’t go to Nebraska, it’s too cold.”

*You sleep in the streets!* I wanted to scream.

“Some people,” a social worker told me, “can do fine at a job for a day or two. But it’s the sheer dailiness that gets to them.”

The Gospel according to John shakes a finger at such inert and excuse-making people. John is famous for his variations on “See and believe.” But he’s also insisting, “Decide and do.” Our passage today is an example of that.

The eminent German theologian Rudolf Bultmann has suggested that the organization of the Fourth Gospel is faulty, for Jesus is in Galilee in chapter four, where he offered his “living water” to the Samaritan woman; he’s in Jerusalem in chapter five, offending the Jewish authorities by healing on the sabbath; and he’s back in Galilee in chapter six, where he feeds the five thousand and walks on water.

It's true that if chapter six and chapter five were reversed, we wouldn't have the frenetic, geographically zig-zagging Jesus who can be so tiring when we're reading the Gospel narratives straight through. But he is a man of action for all the evangelists. In few places is the contrast between his stirring, restless movement and the inertia and passivity of those he has come to save on greater display than in this tough-love confrontation.

In the King James version, there is a vivid and rather disheartening description of the sheep gate and its five porticoes (or porches): "In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water." Also in the King James there is an addition that seems to have been a minor gloss on the text and was later discarded in other translations: "For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had."

The Bible translation I prefer does without that, simply portraying an infirm man who "had been ill for thirty-eight years." Walking up to him and perceiving his yearning, Jesus asks, "Do you want to be made well?" ("Wilt thou be made whole?" in King James).

And what Jesus hears in response could be characterized as a whine of self-pity. The infirm man complains that, seemingly—for how many of his 38 years?—he's been trying to be healed, but no one will help him into the pool when the water is stirred up, or others barge in front of him, so he languishes there.

Jesus had told the Samaritan woman that "those who drink of the water that I will give will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). And now, less than 50 verses later, Jesus implies that *he* is the stirred-up water the weakened man was seeking, ignoring his excuses and ordering him, in King James, to "rise, take up thy bed, and walk."

There is actually very little in the Gospels that matches the Sunday school depiction of Jesus as the lambish sweetheart who wouldn't harm a fly. Looking closely at the Gospel passages, one often sees instead a confident, brook-no-guff leader. And here he's no different, essentially saying, "Enough with this shilly-shallying. Walk."

"And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the Sabbath."

We can find a hundred excuses *not* to do something, even if it is for our health and well-being. And sometimes Jesus doesn't want to "talk about it"; he needs to command. Jesus is very rarely concerned with what we call "process" in the Gospels; he is all about decision, yes or no, hot or cold. He cuts to the chase.

The Gospel according to John is frequently a call to action, and this passage is just one of many examples. Let us not focus on what hinders our commitment to Christ or what gets in the way of our prayer and good works. Let us take up our mats and walk.