

Sermon (5/1/16, John 5: 1-18):

One year a relative of mine gave all her grand-children red umbrellas with their names written on them. When we opened her gift on Christmas morning, my siblings and I were thrilled. Having our own umbrella made us feel grown up and important.

Being the impulsive young children we were, we opened them. One, two, three – our living room was filled with bright red bubbles bobbing up and down, ready to take on any rain clouds that might suddenly appear inside our house.

My mother nearly had a heart attack. ‘Put them down!’ she yelled as she jumped from her chair to grab them from us. ‘Don’t you know it’s bad luck to open an umbrella in the house?!’ She was visibly shaken and, to be honest, so were we.

My mother could be like that sometimes...she had these superstitions which she was convinced needed to be strictly enforced. Apparently it was something instilled in her as a child.

For the heck of it this week, I looked up superstitions on the internet and, my gosh, I couldn’t believe how many I found. Here’s a few of them.

Pulling a gray hair out will cause ten more. I guess at some point in my life I did a lot of pulling.

Lettuce, apparently, promotes child bearing in young women. And that, my friends, is where babies come from!

Seeing an ambulance is very unlucky unless you pinch your nose or hold your breath until you see a black or brown dog.

At a baseball game, I remember once noticing how each player rubbed the head of the bat boy every time they headed out to the field. I felt sorry for this poor guy whose hair was perpetually a mess but he seemed to take it in stride. Turns out they did it because they believed it was good luck.

So many things to avoid and/or do as we struggle to gain some control over that which often feels uncontrollable.

Somewhere along the line someone or maybe even a few people must have dipped their toes in a pool called Bethzatha in Jerusalem which led to some sort of healing. Perhaps someone who was ill found herself feeling

better after taking a dip in the pool the day before. Quickly, she surmised, it must have been the pool.

From there it snowballed to the point where the desperate, those who had nothing to lose, filled the pool's porticos. They were the forgotten, the ostracized, those whose bodies bore the wounds of disease and brokenness and whose hearts were weighed heavy with feelings of rejection and worthlessness.

Over the years, I have walked the hallways of numerous emergency rooms, sometimes when they were filled to capacity. Beds and gurneys lined up everywhere – along hallway walls, behind make shift curtains, crowded into small rooms. As you walk past these beds, you hear the sounds of pain, you see the eyes of the desperate searching for relief, you feel the fear emanating from loved ones standing nearby.

I imagine that's what it was like to walk those crowded porticos only in this place there were no Doctors, no nurses, no technicians, no one to call who could assist. However slim, however far-fetched this pool called Beth-zatha was their only source of hope. There were rules, though. Healing only occurred when the waters were 'stirred up'. It's difficult to know exactly what that means. Did it bubble like jet sprays in a hot tub? Did the surface break with waves like what happens on a lake when the wind blows? The term seems vague enough that if a healing didn't occur it would be easy to blame it on misinterpreted stirring.

Once the stirring began, there was, apparently, also a quota as to how many would be healed - only the first who made it into the pool. Makes for some really heartbreaking mental images of what that place looked like when the waters came to life - people clawing their way to the pool's edge, family members pushing and shoving others out of the way, a mass tumbling of bodies over the pool's wall as people splashed into the water. It's enough to make you cringe.

Who made it in first? Again, I would guess it was a tough thing to measure and an easy culprit to blame when no healing occurred.

It's interesting that it was this place where Jesus chose to walk on this day when he went to Jerusalem. Not exactly a place to brighten one's spirit.

As he walked these porticos of desperation he happened upon a man who had laid there for many, many years – 38 to be exact. Every day of which he spent hoping that maybe, just maybe, this would be the day when the waters surged and, by some small miracle, he would be able to crawl his way to the pool ahead of everyone else. 38 years is a lifetime. It emphasizes just how hopeless his situation was.

‘Do you want to be made well?’ Jesus asks him. The man doesn’t really answer Jesus’ question. He mostly explains why healing and hope is impossible for him. Clearly he has no idea who Jesus is. He is quite unlike the official who, just previously to this, came to Jesus believing that Jesus had the ability heal his son.

What Jesus does next refutes the mechanical nature we sometimes try to foist upon hope. In fact, it makes life feel a little scarier because the hope we see here emphasizes just how impossible it is to devise ways that will provoke God to act or, as our superstitions sometimes indicate, cause good fortune to come our way.

Jesus doesn’t command the water to bubble, Jesus doesn’t carry the man to the pool to make sure he’s the first to get in, Jesus doesn’t even demand from him some pre-condition of faith.

In this miracle, the paralyzed man is completely passive. He has no clue as to who Jesus is, what Jesus is capable of, and he makes no request of Jesus. Jesus has picked him. At the end of this story, Jesus will not pronounce it was this man’s faith that made him well.

Even though the man seems to do a very poor job at answering Jesus’ question, Jesus, none the less, is moved to act. He tells the man to stand up, take his mat, and walk away. Walk away from the pool. Walk away from the idea that God’s compassion is so scarce that it must be wrangled out of God by being good enough, holy enough, perfect enough, or fast enough. Walk away from the notion that God is a vending machine where our relationship with God is little more than a transaction requiring exact change. Walk away from the old wives tales we have about pools and pinching our nose. Walk away from those voices, inside and out, that tell us we can’t, we shouldn’t, and maybe it’s safer to stay put on that portico than to venture off into the unknown. Walk away from aimlessness to a

life filled with purpose and meaning.

Now, of course, one of the questions that arise out of this is why Jesus picked this man and, at least from what we can tell, only this man. There were plenty of others there who could have benefited from Jesus' healing power. I have no answer to that but what I do know is that the church officials in this story seem to get in the way of things.

Immediately, they notice this guy walking around and carrying his mat and, instead of celebrating his healing, they focus on the rules that he is breaking by carrying his mat on the Sabbath.

'You know, Jesus, we can't have you just going around willy-nilly healing people like this... there are rules, protocols, conditions that must be met, certain people that need to come first.' They argue.

'For this reason they started to persecute Jesus and seeking all the more to kill him...' The text tells us.

It's a sad commentary. It makes you wonder what might have happened if, in this case, the church had not gotten in Jesus' way. Might there have been more healings?

It does seem to me that where ever Jesus went love, grace, and healing seemed to break out. Sometimes it healed bodies and most times it did that plus so much more, sometimes even to the point where the physical healing seemed minor. Love just seemed to flow from Jesus unhindered, unfiltered, unbidden – beyond anyone's ability to control, dictate, demand, figure out, or even stop. Sometimes Jesus wept, sometimes Jesus was reluctant, sometimes it came to those who believed in Jesus, and, sometimes, as in this story, it just flowed even to those who didn't know who Jesus was.

Perhaps it would have made things a little easier if Jesus had been more methodical and predictable. Perhaps, it would be much more satisfying if we could glean from these stories a clear step by step procedure that would surely lead to a healing response from Jesus. Pinch your nose, hold your breath, repeat this prayer verbatim, be the first into the pool – we could handle that but having a Jesus who heals, who loves, who extends grace, who provokes hope without rhyme or reason, well, it leaves us in a most confusing and difficult place. Not only does it make us

wonder what we must do to get God's attention but, maybe more importantly, it forces us to examine how we might be the ones getting in the way of this grace that seems to flow so freely and so naturally from Jesus. It does seem here that while we can't predict where this grace will flow, we do have the ability to thwart it.

To be sure, this is a tough thing. It feels like we are leaving an awful lot to chance. It might even require our leaving behind on that portico the preconditions we tend to conjure up for grace.

Perhaps it would be helpful to remember another pool that sits right here in the center of our life together – the water in this baptismal font. This water requires no bubbling, no stirring, and no waves. This water is not reserved for the strongest and the best - the one who makes it here first. There is no scarcity to this water and no way to measure its impact. There is plenty go around and the mark it leaves is permanent – *it was for you that Jesus came into the world, it was for you that Jesus died and conquered death. We love because God first loved us.*

Yes, sometimes the best we can do is to get out of the way and let Jesus' grace do its thing.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.