

**“Words to Live By:  
To Understand”  
John 5:1-18  
March 31, 2019  
Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Pastor Andy Kinsey**

*“Jesus said the invalid, ‘Stand up, take your mat, and walk.’”*

**- John 5:8**

**Prayer of Preparation**

O Lord, help us to understand that all things are possible through your Son Jesus Christ: help us to see that you are working for our good all day long. Amen.

**Sermon**

In 1939, a young graduate student by the name of George Dantzig enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley, to study statistics under the Polish-born professor Jerzy Neyman. At the beginning of one of the class sessions, Dr. Neyman wrote on the chalk board two famous examples of unsolvable math problems. He then dismissed the class.

George Dantzig arrived late that day and saw the two problems on the board; thinking they were homework he transcribed the problems in his notebook and went home and went to work, not knowing, of course, what Dr. Neyman had said. It took a little longer than Dantzig thought, but he ultimately solved the problems.

On a Sunday morning, six weeks later, Dr. Jerzy Neyman knocked on George Dantzig’s door to share the good news that George had solved these problems. George thought he was in trouble for turning in the assignment late.

Later in World War II, George Dantzig would work as a mathematical advisor to the Defense Department. He would also go on to shape the way airlines

schedule their fleets, shipping companies deplore their trucks, oil companies run their refineries, and businesses manage their revenue projections.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, we can also trace the genesis of all that genius back to a moment of confusion. In Dantzig's own words: "If someone had told me that those two problems were unsolvable, I would probably would not have tried to solve them."

One of the best lines I have always enjoyed from the movies is from Jerry Reed's little song in *Smokey and the Bandit*: "We are going to do what they say can't be done." Translated into my own may thinking: "Tell me what I can't do, and I will find a way we will do it!"

Perhaps some here may remember the Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968. Up until that time most high jumpers used different techniques to go over the bar – e.g., the straddle, the roll, the scissors jump, to name three. Then along came a young man by the name of Dick Fosbury, who went over the bar shoulders-first and face up. Even his coaches thought it was odd. Fosbury, however, ended up jumping over seven feet during the games and changed the direction of high jumping forever. Some folks said that he couldn't do it. He did it anyway.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus once stated in Matthew's Gospel that "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). And in case we didn't get that point, we can read an inverted version of it in Luke's Gospel that "Nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). In other words, don't tell God, what God can't do!

I suppose if the Scriptures say the same thing in two different ways, it must be important! There is an invitation being extended to us to *understand* who God is and what God can do.

### **Words to Live By: Understand**

And that's our word to live by: *to understand*. Our faith is always trying *to understand*, to come to grips with who God is and what God does, with who we are and what we can do, with what is possible and with what is impossible.

To *understand* something does not mean we will have all the answers. Indeed, to *understand* something may mean that we come to the limits of our

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Batterson, *The Grave Robber: How Jesus Can Make Your Impossible Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 101-13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

understanding! Rather, to *understand* something means that we are always checking our assumptions, always willing to say, “Hey, wait a minute! I didn’t see it that way before.”

For example, how do we *understand* the miracles taking place all around us in an age that places more faith in science than in God? Perhaps we are the ones who make far too many false assumptions about what *is* and what *isn’t* possible!

Therefore, perhaps it is also the case that one of the reasons we have not is because we ask not, or try not, or believe not.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps we are the ones who need to open our eyes and see the glimpses of truth that God is working for our good (Romans 8:28). Maybe this is what we need to *understand* – that in Christ God is always working to bring healing (John 5:17).

### **Pool of Bethesda**

Because, if we are reading our passage correctly today, about Jesus healing the man who has been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, we need to realize that there is a whole other dimension or reality here that Jesus is opening up that invites us to check our assumptions about the ways Jesus works (John 5:17-18).

For what Jesus is doing is not simply healing a man (which he does), but confronting two different kinds of mindsets – one superstitious, the other legalistic.<sup>4</sup>

The one that is superstitious pertains to the Pool of Bethesda, to a pool in Jerusalem that drew people on account of its so-called healing powers. Healing came, so the legend goes, to the person who could *first* enter the pool after the water was stirred, apparently, by angels.<sup>5</sup> Imagine all the false starts and cold plunges on the days when the winds gave the effect of the angles stirring water! Who would enter the water first?<sup>6</sup>

The problem was that the prize for first would go to someone who was healthy and who had the ability to get in! Not the poor and the crippled. The whole thing was a sham.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the whole scene is really a picture of the way popular

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *John – Part 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004), 55-56.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Craddock, *John* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

forms of religion can favor those who are “well-off,” holding out nothing to those in the most extreme circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

The man in our text, who is an invalid, had seen all of this, and, in many respects, he knew his place – on his mat. He wasn’t going to stir the waters, so to speak (John 5:2-4). He was simply going to keep on sitting there.

Until Jesus comes on the scene, and things begin to change: for Jesus doesn’t just see a man on a mat and pool full of superstition and a popular religion that gives credence to the “healthy.” Instead, Jesus sees a man who simply needs to be affirmed and reminded of who he is as a child of God (Romans 8:17)! After all, Jesus doesn’t have much to do with the superstitious part of the equation, and he definitely doesn’t buy into the false assumptions of such superstition. Rather, he offers the man a whole new way of living: one of freedom and faith. And he does so by asking the man a very simple question: *Do you want to be made well?*

It is a great question, isn’t it? Do you want to be made well?

### **Do You Want to Be Made Well?**

I have known quite a few people over the years whom I have wondered sometimes if they really wanted to be made well. And the reason I say that is because, even after constant urging and coddling – I have noticed how they just do not want to make the changes they need to make to get well! By remaining “sick,” they can foster a great deal of attention, thereby staying on their mat and hope for a better day – which, of course, never seems to come. No effort, no change.

What’s the old saying? Insanity is doing the same things over and over again expecting different results? In this case, insanity is doing nothing at all!

But it is a great question? Do I really want to get well? Yes? No? Maybe? Do I really want to change and/or be changed?

Sound harsh?

I have a feeling – and I cannot prove it in the text – but I have a feeling that Jesus senses that the problem with this man is not that he has been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, but that he has not been challenged in thirty-eight years to get up and walk! Did Jesus see something in him others had overlooked? Did Jesus see

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

potential where others didn't? Because once Jesus tells the man to get up, the man gets up! That's it! There is no "In the name of Yahweh, I heal you" or "I pray God's blessings on you." Rather, it is simply an instruction: "Stand up and walk!"

It is an important point to *understand*: sometimes when it comes to miracles in the Bible, not all miracles are alike. That is, some miracles actually take the form of tough love, like this one, while others, like Naaman, take seven dips in the Jordan River to occur (2 Kings 5:1-19), while still others take extra effort, like the woman who fights through the crowd to touch the hem of Jesus' garment (Luke 8:40-48), or the disciples who have to sweat it out to catch more fish after Jesus tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat (John 21:1-14).

Miracles are *God's* doing, in *God's* way, in *God's* time.<sup>9</sup> And sometimes they require our participation!

And yet, there are also times when I wonder whether the truest miracle of all is when folks actually take to heart what Jesus is saying, when faith is born and then formed (John 3:1-8)! That's a miracle: when folks begin to *understand* who Jesus is as God's Son (John 5:18)!

### **More Trouble?**

One of the reasons the religious folks of Jesus' day had such a difficult time with Jesus performing a miracle on the Sabbath was because they couldn't fathom or understand what *God* could do, not to mention when and where and to whom God could do it!<sup>10</sup>

In other words, healing a man on the Sabbath was a crime, as well as picking up a mat and moving it (John 5:10, John 5:17). Those were "no-no's." But, hey, what's the saying? If that's what the law says, then that's what the law says. The law is the law and even God must follow the rules.<sup>11</sup> After all, once we begin to make exceptions to one person, then we need to allow for others! True? False?

I can't help but think that such a mindset is still very much with us: focusing on what we can't do rather than what Jesus is doing! For the issue here is really not

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Ibid., 44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 45.

on the law, but on Jesus. It is about *understanding* that the work of God and the work of Jesus are the same (John 5:17). That's the real kicker!

Yes, breaking the Sabbath would have thrown all the religious folks in a tizzy, for if God cannot be trusted to keep the rules, then why bother? Like the man on the mat, God must also stay put (John 5:15)!

But equating yourself with God? *That* will get you killed (5:16). *That's* a deal-breaker.

And yet, and here's a question I ask of all us religious folks: if *God* is able to do far more than what we can possibly imagine, then why is it that we fear what *God* can do (Ephesians 3:20)? If, as Jesus says, with *God* all things are possible, then what is it in us that prompts us to pull back? What is it about the nature of sin to constrict us, to focus on the impossible rather than the possible?

After all, Jesus says that he is working, even now on the Sabbath; he is working for our good all day long, making us not victims but conquerors through the One who loves us, and if conquerors, then heirs with Christ, *understanding* always that from beginning to end, we all belong to God, we all are God's children, doing what "they" say can't be done, like getting off our mats and walking, liking trusting and obey Jesus (Romans 8:12-18). May it be so.