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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
5/1/2016, The Sixth Sunday of Easter  
John 5:1-9

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? (John 5:6, KJV)

This story of Jesus healing the invalid at the pool of Bethesda is one of my favorite Bible stories. For me, it abounds with the hope of the gospel. But also it invites some soul-searching. That question Jesus asks, “Would you be made whole?”: You might think the answer is easy. Of course the man would be made whole, after being an invalid for thirty-eight years! And yet, *if* he becomes well, he must understand that a new life awaits him and is appropriate for him. His old accustomed ways will no longer be right for him. If he would be made whole, he must get himself ready for an adventure.

God bless him! He is indeed ready for it. His spirit has not been broken by his decades of suffering. He has not permitted himself to become riveted down to the floor. When Jesus asks him whether he would be whole, he does not hesitate. He answers, Yes. And then, when Jesus tells him to rise, take up his bed and walk, he does so. I imagine him leaping up, hoisting his bed aloft, and striding out into a new life. We can get used to just about anything. Glad to say, this man *did not* get so used to suffering that he was no longer open to a new and better life.

To enjoy this story, let’s take a look at the characters in the story and the stage for this story. That last item – the stage: I believe that the gospel for you and me has something to do with the stage. The immediate stage is the pool of Bethesda two thousand years ago. But there is a parallel stage that includes you and me in this modern world here in New York City. We occupy a setting very much like that of the invalids from long ago. We could use some help — each of us — and today Jesus strolls into our midst. He really does!

The cast of characters I would like to lift up are (1) Jesus, (2) the invalid who is healed, and (3) the invalid folk who happen not to be healed.

Let’s begin with Jesus. He is where you would expect him to be. He comes to the impressive capitol city, but we do not find him whiling away his time in the great museums or universities or music halls. Rather, we find him among the sick folk. That seems right for our Great Physician of body and soul. Jesus himself had made this sensible point:

When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came

not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Mark 2:17, KJV)

In coming to the pool of Bethesda, Jesus is seeking sheep. He is seeking a soul that needs him. He is like a good shepherd who cannot rest content that one of his sheep should perish:

How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? (Matthew 18:12, KJV)

Jesus is where he is out of compassion, not out of idle curiosity. He is not interested in the pool or in the Sheep Gate. He is interested in human beings. Jesus is here as the One he is: he is here as Saviour.

Second, let us consider the man himself. Some people have to wait a really long time in life to get what they want. This man was such a one. He did not seek something frivolous or luxurious. He simply wanted to be able to walk like you and me. There was something wrong with the man – something that ancient medicine could not solve. So he goes to where he has a chance. Having a chance is a great thing in life. If he can move quickly enough, he can plunge into the pool when the angel stirs the water, and he will be made well. After thirty-eight years, his odds of actually accomplishing this might be fading. His body has been weak for too long. It is going to be hard for him to make it into the pool on his own, and he has no one to help him. So, the odds are not good, but who can blame him for trying to be healed? Who can blame him for being in that place where at least he has a chance?

I knew a man once – a devout Roman Catholic – who was dying of cancer. As a last resort, he traveled to Pittsburgh to a faith healer named Kathryn Kuhlman. This happened back in the early 1970s. It was an unusual thing for a Catholic to do, to go to a faith healer, but who could blame the man for giving it a try? When the doctors had given up, it was good to be able to think that he still had some chance in life – the chance of a miracle through the ministry of Kathryn Kuhlman. It did not work, and the man was not bitter about that. Still, I sympathize with his desire to live and to be well. Our man in this morning's Bible story was such a man. For thirty-eight years he had suffered and hoped to be made whole again. So he placed his poor broken body in the place where at least he had a chance.

This brings us to my third cast of characters: I've spoken of Jesus and the invalid who is healed. Now, let's think of those other sick folk lying around the pool of Bethesda. They are anonymous. We do not know their names or the details of their sickness. But, like the invalid in this morning's story, they too are at the pool. They too are trying to give themselves a chance. Some of them might have waited at that pool for years too, hoping to get into that water first and so to be healed. I feel sorry for them. I bet we all feel sorry for people who suffer from

various illnesses for a long time, with little encouragement anymore from medicine or from anyone in sight.

You might know someone like that. Let me mention my brother, for example. His name is Philip. We include him in the prayers from time to time. He is six years younger than me. But rights, he should still be in the prime of life. But Multiple Sclerosis has been dragging him down in a relentless way. That MS has laid low his body, though not his spirit. He is a person of the most strong and gentle spirit, though his body is just about helpless. If he were at the poolside in Bethesda, he would have almost no chance to make it first into the water. He would be one of those on the sideline while the one invalid stands up, picks up his bed, and goes out rejoicing.

Now we come to the Gospel. We come to the good news of this story, for the One who made the thirty-eighty-year invalid walk, lives and can make others whole too. Because of Jesus, there is hope for the other poor folk at Bethesda's pool. There is hope for you, for me.

And this leads me to discuss a chief point, and that is the stage for this great story of healing. The stage in the gospel story is the pool of Bethesda. But that stage is being repeated now, for Easter means that this same Jesus who was to be found where people needed him so long ago is still to be found where two or three are gathered together in his name.

A few weeks ago, we happened to have eighteen people gathered in the Martin Luther Room for the Wednesday evening liturgy. It was crowded around the conference table there. We kept bringing in more chairs. So, it was crowded that evening in the Martin Luther Room, and yet there was room for One more: Jesus was able to slip into that room with us, for he longs to be where people are in need. Not everyone was healed in the Bible's version of this event. Some people were left unhealed. But no one now need be left without Jesus, the Great Physician of body and soul.

He asks the question of each of us, "Would you be well? Would you be whole?" This question is not the same thing as "Would we avoid hell?" or "Would we be willing to go to heaven?" Those are easy questions. This one takes a bit more soul-searching. Would we be whole? The man at Bethesda's pool answered Yes and sprang up into his new life. He did not wait for heaven. So now, Jesus is in the house, and he speaks of abundant life:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10, RSV)

Would we have this abundant life? Would we be whole?

Well, anyone looking on at the man in the Bible story could understand why *he* would want to be whole. You can glance at a man who has been weak for so long and know that it would be a blessing for that man to be whole again. But when Jesus asks you and me whether we would be whole, we might not be able to see so

clearly our own weakness. We might, for example, have indulged in a bad temper for so long, or yielded to certain vices for so long, that they have come to feel okay to us. Our *family* might wish we could be whole. Our colleagues might wish it, our neighbors might wish it, but do *we* wish it?

The pool is right here. I mean the baptismal pool. There is no need to rush toward this pool, no need to try to out-run others to it, for this pool has infinite capacity and welcomes anyone willing. And we do not need to wait for an angel to trouble the waters of this pool, for the Lord of the angels be right here this morning, where two or three are gathered together in his name. The invitation is broad and free: Would you be well? Would you be whole? Would you have a more abundant life? Then come to Jesus, the Great Physician of body and soul.

In concrete terms, if you are not yet baptized, then begin the path toward wholeness by being baptized. Speak to me. Your baptism will be a joy for everyone in the church.

If you are already baptized, but have strayed away from Jesus, then turn to him again, through Confession, repentance, absolution, and amendment of life.

And if you are already baptized, but your baptism is lukewarm — something you hardly think about anymore — then celebrate this Easter Season 2016 by drawing closer to Jesus. Think of him more. Let his image rise up in you more. Greet this world, with all its complexity, stress, technology, and temptations... greet this world more in the name and in the spirit of Jesus. Surprise your world with a more Christ-like spirit. Rise up rejoicing from your prayers and from the church's liturgy. Take up your bed and walk forth into a world that could really use you to be well and whole, following after Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.