

May 5, 2013 “No Excuses” John 5:1-9

There was a pool of water near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, called Bethesda in Hebrew, that had a story behind it. Every now and then, its waters stirred and the saying went that whoever managed to get into it first at that moment would be healed from whatever disease was afflicting the person.... There was a man at this pool who had been sick for thirty-eight years! He had spent his life living by that pool, hoping that somehow he might get the healing he so desperately needed. He and hundreds of others of afflicted folks...

Thirty-eight years, though. Waiting. Stretched out by the pool, hoping to be the first one in. But thirty-eight years was a long time to wait by a pool.

Jesus went to the man and asked him a tough question: “Do you want to get well?” The man obviously did not know with whom he was speaking, because he heard Jesus’ words, not as an invitation, but as a criticism. He responded with his thirty-eight year old excuse: “Sir, whenever the water stirs, I cannot get in fast enough, for I don’t have anybody to help me get in.”

Jesus did not want to hear his excuse, he wanted the man to hear that he was being offered new life. “Get up, take up your mat, and start walking.” And so the man did, and walked off healed.

How many of us have spent our lives being “close to the pool” but never close enough. Perhaps we, too, when offered new life from God, meet the offer with excuses: “I have too many obligations to start a half hour of prayer every day..... I cannot make a serious monetary commitment to you, God, because I might not have enough for the necessities in life.... I know my neighbor is having a tough time, but I wouldn’t know what to say, anyway...”

So we remain paralyzed, unchanged, close to the Source of what could be new life for us, but always with an excuse, a reason why we cannot let God have a larger claim on our lives.

We may do the same thing as a church. We look at the world, and ask that God give it peace, that God heal our world’s brokenness.... But with the prayer, do we not also utter our excuses for not doing something to bring about peace? So many are hungry – we think about sending in our money, perhaps, but then the time slips by and our money stays in *our* possession.... “Do you want to be healed?” And so many children, even in our own country, need homes and folks to read to them and reach out to them...and we may pray for them, and feel bad about them, but then the excuses why WE cannot be God’s instruments to help come...and we remain “close to the pool,” stuck in the ever-deepening

rut of good intentions. “Do you want to be healed?”

You see, when Jesus told his followers (and us) that in order to gain life one needs to lose it, he was serious. And when he promised all of us that if we seek first God’s kingdom, everything else that we need will be given us by the Heavenly Father who knows better than we do just what we need for thirst-quenching, anxiety-busting LIFE, he was speaking the truth..

So let us keep this story of Jesus and the man who had been pretty much living by excuse for 38 years in our hearts....and let us all ask ourselves if WE want to be healed of something that is keeping us from trusting God, from really letting God use us for however many years we have left to live, from really living.

I want to share a story now, entitled “The Emperor’s Seeds.” *Once there was an emperor in the Far East who was growing old and knew it was coming time to choose his successor. Instead of choosing one of his assistants or one of his own children, he decided to do something different. He called all the young people in the kingdom together one day and said to them, It has come time for me to step down and to choose the next emperor. I have decided to choose one of you.” The kids were shocked! But the emperor continued, “I am going to give each one of you a seed today. One seed. It is a very special seed. I want you to go home, plant the seed, water it, and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from this one seed. I will then judge the plants that you bring to me, and the one I choose will be the next emperor of the kingdom!”*

*There was one boy named Ling who was there that day and he, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his mother the whole story. She helped him get a pot and some planting soil, and he planted the seed and watered it carefully. Every day he would water it and watch to see if it had grown. After about three weeks, some of the other youths began to talk about their seeds and the plants that were beginning to grow.*

*Ling kept going home and checking his seed, but nothing ever grew. Three weeks, four weeks, five weeks went by. Still nothing. By now all the others were talking about their plants, but Ling didnt have a plant, and he felt like a failure. Six months went by – still nothing in Ling’s pot. He just knew he had killed his seed. Everyone else had trees and tall plants, but he had nothing. Ling didn’t say anything to his friends, though. He just kept waiting for his seed to grow.*

*A year finally went by and all the youths of the kingdom prepared to take their plants to the emperor for inspection. Ling told his mother that he wasn’t going to take an empty pot. But she encouraged him to go, to take his pot, and to be honest about what had happened. Ling felt sick to his stomach, but he knew his mother was right. He took his*

*empty pot to the palace.*

*When Ling arrived, he was amazed at the variety of plants grown by all the other youths. They were beautiful – in all shapes and sizes. Ling put his empty pot on the floor and many of the other kids laughed at him. A few felt sorry for him and just said, “Hey, nice try.”*

*When the emperor arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted the young people. Ling just tried to hide in the back. The emperor declared, “My, what great plants, trees and flowers you have grown! Today one of you will be appointed the next emperor.”*

*All of a sudden, the emperor spotted Ling in the back of the room with his empty pot. He ordered his guards to bring the boy to the front. Ling was terrified, and thought, “The emperor knows I’m a failure! Maybe he will have me killed!”*

*When Ling got to the front, the emperor asked him his name. “My name is Ling,” he replied. All the kids were laughing and making fun of him. The emperor told everyone to quiet down. He looked at Ling, and then announced to the crowd, “Behold your new emperor! His name is Ling!”*

*Ling was stunned! He couldn’t even grow his seed. How could he be the new emperor? Then the emperor said, “One year ago today, I gave everyone here a seed. I told you to take the seed, plant it, water it, and bring it back to me today. But I gave you seeds that must lie dormant for two years before they will grow. All of you, except for Ling, have brought me trees and plants and flowers. When you found that the seed I have you would not grow, you substituted another seed for it. Ling was the only one with the courage and honesty to bring me a pot with my seed in it. Therefore, he will be your new emperor! (From *More Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*, Wayne Rice, pp. 58-60)*

No excuses. Just grit. God knows exactly what is and is not going on in our lives. God knows what we need, and God alone can give it to us. But we have to trust God, that God knows how to guide us through this thing called life.

Where we find ourselves lying near the pool, feeling unable to change, convinced that there is no way for us to succeed or find real life, we are at the very place where our Lord would whisper to us the questions we need to answer: Do you want to be healed? Do you really trust me? Will you dare to serve me and let me lead you through this life?

If we will say yes and let go of our excuses and fears and “false plantings,” God will take our hand and lead us to wholeness and the life our Lord has labored to give us. May it be so for each of us. Amen.

