

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 22, 2022 – 6 Easter, Rogation Sunday
John 5:1-9
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's reading from the Gospel of John needs some background information so that we can understand the story, as is so often the case when we read and hear portions of the Bible. Jesus was passing by the pool of Beth-zatha or Bethesda. The sick and maimed gathered around this pool because periodically an angel "troubled" or stirred up the water. It was believed that the first person to reach the pool after the angel had troubled the water would be cured.

As a brief aside, you may be interested to know that this story is the biblical basis for the Negro spiritual "Wade in the Water." The words of the refrain are: "Wade in the water, wade in the water, children. God's gonna trouble the water," that is, God will act to help human beings in need. It is believed that Harriet Tubman, who helped free many slaves in the South, used this song to warn slaves to get off the trail and into the water to prevent the dogs used by slavers from finding them. The biblical accounts of God's actions in human life and history have powerfully shaped the lives of people throughout the centuries – never doubt that! – and they have that power still.

The man with whom Jesus speaks has been sitting by the pool, waiting to be first in the water, for 38 years. Clearly, he cannot walk and that is why he is there, hoping to be cured. Jesus realized that the man had been there a long time and asked what may strike us as a surprising question: "Do you want to be made well?" We can imagine that the man might have thought, "Well, of course! I've been sitting by this healing water for 38 years, waiting for someone to help me in. Isn't it obvious that I want to be cured?" Remembering that the gospels tell us that Jesus knew what was in people's hearts – which means that he understood the truth about people's motivations – he asks the searching question, "Do you want to be made well?" Apparently convinced that the man did want to be made well, Jesus healed him, saying simply, "Stand up, take your mat and walk."

Now I want to speak briefly about Christian theology, touching on some fundamental beliefs we have about God and humanity. These thoughts may strike you as very basic – which they are – but sometimes it is important to be reminded and "re-grounded" in the foundational principles of our Christian faith. I am indebted to the work of the brilliant 20th century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, and his book "The Nature and Destiny of Man" (1939) for his explanation of the key elements of Christian faith.

God is the Creator of all that is, all that ever has been, and all that ever will be, and God's creation is good. We are God's creatures, totally dependent on God, not ourselves "gods." God has laid upon human beings certain moral responsibilities and obligations, and God is and will be the judge of every human being. Among our moral responsibilities is the care of God's creation and creatures, human and non-human. As individuals and as groups of people – nations and churches among them – God will

stand over against us as our judge. Personally and in history all human beings fail to fulfill the moral obligations given us by God, so we hope for the mercy of God and reconciliation with God.

In Jesus Christ God has been revealed to humanity in a unique, full, and final revelation. That is one reason it is so important for Christian people to know Jesus through scripture, especially through the four gospel narratives. Jesus' teaching, his behavior, everything we can learn from him and about him – all this guides us in understanding who God created us to be and how God wants us to act, in addition to learning something (certainly not everything) about who God is.

Christian faith is incarnational. That means many things, including our belief that God was incarnate – in human form – in Jesus, and that what human beings do with their/our bodies is of ultimate importance. Jesus teaches us that how we behave comes “from the heart.” The “heart” means more than emotions and feelings. The “heart” also means the intellect and the will. It is out of our hearts – feelings, intellect and will – that human beings so often go wrong and behave in ways that are out of alignment with God's will. Jesus clearly teaches that God's will is for us to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

In the church we are called to follow Jesus. We are meant to “embody” the teaching of Jesus because we believe that the church is the body of Christ in the world. The church and its members always fall short of this call, one way or another. We need to be reminded of this and of how we can more faithfully be who we are meant to be. This is uncomfortable. We would rather not hear how we are challenged to change. We would rather not be reminded of God's expectations of us because they can feel too demanding. But it's best if we are.

In the New Testament we find accounts of what several early churches were like. St. Paul's letters to the churches in a variety of places reveal that there have always been problems in the church, always difficulties in how the members of the church behave toward one another. Sometimes Paul directly confronts the church about particular faults, such as members who boasted of their spiritual gifts and failed to use them for the common good. Sometimes we can infer from Paul's exhortations regarding how Christians should behave toward one another the ways in which they were falling short.

I'd like to consider a passage of scripture that is very familiar to us, the 13th chapter of the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. This is often read at weddings, but Paul is not actually writing to a couple about how to live together (though much of his advice is good). He is writing to a group of people who are followers of Jesus – to a church – about how to live together. Just a few of his timeless words:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5).

This passage comes to my mind because of an issue that is affecting this parish and the communities in which we live – the issue of taking precautions to protect ourselves and our neighbors from becoming ill with COVID-19. This is a very serious issue. The New York Times reported last week that over 1 million people have died in this country from the coronavirus. Yesterday the Maine CDC reported that 2,343 people have died from the virus in Maine. The danger is not past, and the danger is greatest for the most vulnerable people among us – including the very young, the elderly, and people with serious health issues. Steps we can take to protect everyone include being vaccinated and wearing masks and practicing social distancing.

Many people refuse to take these precautions. Often their reasons are self-centered. People don't see themselves as high-risk for serious illness, so they don't see the need for the precautions. People assert their "rights" to do what they want to do, regardless of the effect their behavior has on others.

This is not a Christian perspective, a Christian way of being. Our Lord taught us by word and example that our lives are to be lives of self-giving love. We must face how our behavior affects the world and other people – other children of God. When we act in such a way as to harm or risk harm to the world and other people, we must not insist on our own way, but submit to God's way, which is to bring about the health and salvation of all. In the church we are called to use our gifts for the common good. We are called to take care of one another, especially the most vulnerable among us.

God is our judge. Let's not be fools and forget that. God knows our hearts. God wants what is best for us and for everyone. What is best for us and for everyone is for us to love others. In the first epistle of John, we read this about God's love and God's call for us to love one another:

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God....God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.... We love because [God] first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from [God] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4, portions of verses 7 to 21).

When we recognize how we fall short of such love – and we all do – may we turn back to God and work together in harmony for the good of all. Trusting always in God's love and God's mercy – Amen.