Sermon on Easter 6 Year C 2022

“Everyone Has Something” (Joh 5:1-9)

I recently attended a Celebration of Life for my Family Doctor, a man about the same age as me. It was outdoors in my former doc’s backyard. One of his colleagues shared that one of his sayings was and I’m paraphrasing “if we all threw our problems on a pile with the understanding that we needed to pick up a set as well, almost all of us would, upon consideration, pick up our own problems again.”

This tidbit of wisdom makes sense coming from a doc who saw over the course of a lifetime in the work probably 10,000 different sets of problems; almost everyone coming into his office thinking that their problems were worse than other people’s problems.

But there’s another obvious insight that such a gem reveals: Everyone has something; some illness, some deep shame maybe, some huge disappointment, some family dysfunction that is quite serious.

Unlike doctors we may not know this as we watch a seemingly endless stream of healthy people stream by during our days.

Now, of course, not all afflictions are the same, some are physical, some are emotional, economic, or even existential e.g. some people experience existential angst around the meaning of their lives.

And certainly its true that not all afflictions are on the same level of severity. But of this we can be sure, everyone has something!

Which is why almost all of us have questions from the time we’re knee-high-to-a-grasshopper; questions of the role of evil, suffering, aging and death; questions that have some answers, some more satisfying than others.

Intellectual grappling with this is one thing but living with suffering is an immense emotional challenge, perhaps the greatest emotional challenge that humans face; particularly when we sense the fundamental inequality in this regard across societies and even amongst people we know.

Why do some people receive a measure of healing while others continue in despair?

Are some worthier? Is God capricious? Or perhaps God has always been serious about the evolutionary project, that human beings are meant to be the vessel through whom healing comes?

Perhaps our strange gospel text can help.

Invalids are crowding around the pool by the Sheepgate in Jerusalem. The mechanism by which the healing happens “the water is stirred up” is unique, bizarre and the cause of much elbowing, pushing and rushing because apparently this phenomenon is only able to heal one person at a time, not the person who has prayed for healing most earnestly but the first one to get in.

Maybe you’ve had this experience; you’re sitting in the waiting room for the ER and someone who gets there way after you gets admitted before you!

In that case, though it’s irritating, we comfort ourselves by imagining that the process isn’t simply random, that someone has come in with a more serious condition than ourselves.

We hear a lot about how, in God’s goodness, there’s more than enough to go around, whether we’re talking about physical resources are opportunities to share gifts and talents. And I think that’s true, fundamentally, there’s far more potential and healing and gifts that are in this small group than we can imagine.

But we are glossing over stories like our gospel text if we think that reality is always 5000 people getting fed by a couple of loaves and fishes just waiting to happen. That’s my favourite kind of miracle. In stories like that it seems everyone gets something, everyone is treated equally and fairly.

In stories like that one we get the big picture; there’s enough to go round; but in stories like our gospel today we begin to understand that for that to happen we need to focus on each need, nothing will happen automatically.

Jesus focuses all his attention on one man, a man who has been there a very long time, 38 years, a lifetime in the ancient world, it’s a wonder he’s still alive!

Maybe this is why Jesus pays attention to him, but the story doesn’t say. Indeed the NT is resolute in denying what we crave, the justification for the healings that take place.

We want to know that somehow the people who got healed really deserved it and that the ones Jesus ignored didn’t; but alas there is no such karmic satisfaction.

What is really the issue for this man in this story? Unlike other healing stories, there is a known resource for his healing; though Jesus heals him he could have been healed outside of Jesus’ direct ministry.

For however we imagine “the waters being stirred,” it is a recognizable health care system, if you will.

What the man really needs is a friend! A friend who will advocate for him, aid him in his quest.

What it says to us in our community and society is that however we understand the state of our world and the role of evil and suffering, God has not left us without resources. What is required, actually, is help in accessing those resources.

At different times in my life I’ve had the privilege of advocating for different people who simply find our health care system unmanageable; I’ve driven people to appointments and written letters and I like to think that it has made a difference;

though I’m also leery that that works; I’m no health expert, shouldn’t the system work better than that? Of course it should, but as human beings we can’t get away from human influence, get away from friends advocating for friends.

In our day, the lack of access to the “stirred water” can be access to a family doctor who gets to know us over time, who understands our foibles. In that respect we’ve been learning that there are over 1,000,000 British Columbians who have no ready access to health care beyond the services of clinics. It’s tough getting the specialist resources you need when that’s your situation.

We’ve had a opportunity during this pandemic to re-evaluate what’s important to us as a society. We’ve come to greater awareness that society is really only as strong as it’s weakest link.

Less resources into the flashy, more into what’s really most beneficial to the majority of people is something that would seem a no-brainer and something that this story points to, at least obliquely.

The healing takes place on the Sabbath, that day that points to non-competitive rest, to wholeness, to things coming into balance, a day when even cattle and slaves caught a break.

Jesus disrupts that which gives advantage to the few, to the powerful and to those who have capacities that most don’t have and aligns himself with God, the Holy One who designated as the very first thing to be called holy in our scriptures, not our work, but the Sabbath.

Do you take Sabbath? Do you truly combine worship with rest? It is God’s invitation towards balance and equality, both for you and for society. Experiment with it and you too will find yourself in God’s healing pool.

The power of this story is that it’s not abstract, healing comes to each of us in unique ways. As the church we get to model that; we get to pay attention to people and advocate for each other and pray as we do that merciless systems are confronted,

If after throwing our problems on a common pile, most of us would pick up our own once again pick this up also: God doesn’t heal everyone by fiat, most people find healing in partnership with others; and that happens when we value what God values.

That’s part of what we mean when we say, the Risen Christ is among us!