

John 5:1-9
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“Catch-22 Breaking God”

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New York City residents have been debating a “camping ban.” That might sound funny to us as we question who wants to camp in the middle of the city that never sleeps? But of course we realize we are not speaking of “campers” who are choosing this as some sort of vacation, they are forced to “camp” because they don’t have a home to go to.

Nancy York writes about the lineup of people she sees outside Catholic Charities, she tells of those lucky enough to select the right-colored playing card at 6:15pm, they return at 10:15pm and claim their cot. Those who don’t get the right card, return at 10:40pm to see if any cots are still available. And if there are no cots, they are left to “Camp” on the streets of the neighborhood until 8am when the Murphy Centers opens to provide shelter and services.

Those in favor of the camping ban contend that enough services exist to help people out of homelessness. They argue the camping ban provides Police with a tool to connect people with the numerous services.

Others contend there are not enough ready-made services to help everyone navigate their way out of homelessness. They quote the lack of affordable housing and the kind of jobs that pay a living wage make the way out of homelessness even more difficult.

In the meantime, police continue to do their job, waking people up and ticketing them. This ends in rising tensions between the homeless and the officers, and the mounting tickets become another obstacle to the homeless securing affordable housing.

This is a classic example of a Catch-22. And in John’s story we see another Catch-22. An afflicted person, lame for nearly 4 decades, sits by the pool called Bethzatha, which is famous for the healing power of its water. By the way, the old pronunciation was Bethesda which means “house of mercy,” which tells us the legend of this healing pool is why there are so many hospitals by that name. The legend was -- when the pool bubbled, as it did now and then, the first person in the water received complete healing. You can imagine the mad dash toward the water as the wakes began to stir.

In today’s story, an afflicted man complains to Jesus that he doesn’t have anyone to carry him to the water so he never gets there, and of course, he never will. He is in his own “catch-22.” We know how people get themselves stuck in impossible, “catch-22” situations, like sitting by a pool waiting for it to bubble so you could jump in, but you can’t jump. It is painfully ironic how people like you and I, smart people, get ourselves stuck in similar ways all the time.

I might suggest that this is the “personal” catch-22 we see in this story. But there is “bigger” catch-22 revealed as well. How might our society, or the church, how might the “institution”

play a role in this man's predicament? Clearly the healing power has been promoted far and wide. We see this from the crowds gathered around the pool waiting for the water to stir. Yet, as people of faith and Justice, we might find it odd that a pool called "house of mercy" is inaccessible to a great number of people who desperately need its healing?

When Jesus questions the afflicted man, we might imagine he is actually asking "do you really think you can become healed considering the way this "system" is set up?" The "system" I am referring to takes into account those who constructed the pool without considering the needs of those afflicted the way this man is. It takes into account those who promise the pool has healing power available to everyone without considering some people who need the healing will never be able to get in the water. Why construct a pool that can heal all -- in a way that many who need its power cannot access it? That is the "system" I am talking about.

But Jesus does a radical thing. Rather than waiting for the water to stir and helping the man in; he tells him to get up, pick up his mat, and walk. Jesus' words bypass the system which seems to grant equal opportunity to everyone but doesn't grant equal access. As we look at our situation today we might pause and consider how this may relate to newer laws which have already had an affect on access to voting, and access to social services and other issues related to our common life together.

Jesus tells the man to Stand up, take your mat, and walk. And the man is instantly made well. This is the good news of the passage.

We have a savior who changes lives. He can break us out of the personal catch-22's in which we find ourselves trapped. He can overcome the systematic Catch-22's created by the structures and institutions of our society. Jesus can break through all of it and heal us, make us whole!

Sometimes this healing takes physical form as it did for this afflicted man. Other times it takes a more spiritual form, through a sense of acceptance of the way one is differently-abled and the wholeness this acceptance and love allows.

In our story the good news rings out loud and clear: Jesus heals. Our Savior changes lives and he can change your lives for the better, he can heal you of any struggle, affliction, or sorrow you are facing. And this is what the church has to offer the world. A savior with the power to change lives for the better. To heal, to set free, to forgive, to unite, to refresh, to break oppression, to make peace, to put us back together as whole people.

The church doesn't have a product to sell, we don't serve customers. What we have to proclaim is the life changing, lifesaving power of God, through Jesus Christ, present with us even now. A power which can break through the catch-22's in which we find ourselves, and the one's our society creates.

We love a savior who first loved us; a savior who gives confidence which shatters anxious moments, hope which breaks through despair, grace which washes over our alienation, and flames which allows us to live boldly in the face of fear; because in life, in death, in life beyond death God is with us.

Powerfully, Prayerfully, Peacefully, at work among us!!

Amen