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WHEN YOU CAN’T GET IN THE WATER

John 5:1-18

I got a haircut this week. The woman who cut my hair was excited because she had tickets to go to the Padres Fan Fest at Petco Park yesterday. She is an avid Padres fan. We talked about the Padres and what it is like to be a Padres fan. I told her that this year is very unusual for me. I’ve been a Padres fan for more than 40 years. What is unusual about this year is that I have high hopes. I have reasonable hope that this team could actually go all the way to the World Series. That is not the norm for a Padres fan. That organization has been playing Major League Baseball for 54 years. They have had a winning record only 16 times in those 54 years. That means 70% of the time they fail to win more games than they lose. They have made it all the way to the World Series a grand total of 2 times in 54 years. They have won exactly zero World Series championships. This is a team with a remarkable history of futility. Most years any loyal Padre fan who is not blinded by unbridled and utterly unrealistic optimism looks forward to yet another season in which the team’s ceiling is mediocrity and the more likely outcome will be more abject futility, failure and frustration

But not this year. The Padres are coming off their best season since 1998. The core of that team is back, but will be augmented by two of the best players in baseball, Xander Bogaerts and Fernando Tatis Jr, plus a full season of potential all star, Juan Soto. I have so much hope that I feel like anything short of making it to the World Series will be a disappointment. Oh man, I hear myself say that and I think, “Oh no, I’ve set myself up for a big let down.” My hair cutter doesn’t think so, but four decades of following the Padres breeds pessimism.

Unfortunately, living more than a few years can also breed pessimism. It can be hard to have hope in a world where so much does not go our way. Our little grandson, Wesley, one night got a big kick out of taking one of his toy trucks to the top of the stairs, tipping it over the first step and watching it tumble down to the bottom of the stairs. He wanted to do that over and over. Just before he would tip the truck over he would say, “This is going to be not good.” When the doctor called and told me I have melanoma, my thought was not, “No problem. We’re going to lick this.” It was, “This is going to be not good.” Hope is huge, because, as we saw last week, hope is essential to perseverance and to joy in life as well. Today we are going to find out there is reason to hope. Let’s look at John 5:1-18.

JESUS HEALED A MAN

At the beginning of chapter 5 John tells us Jesus left Galilee and went to Jerusalem for one of the feasts, though he doesn’t specify which one. There was a pool in the city surrounded by covered colonnades. John tells us that a “great number of sick and disabled people gathered at this pool every day. There were blind people, some crippled, some paralyzed. They came there hoping for a miracle.

If you pay attention to the verse numbers in the Bible you will see something unusual in this chapter. The numbering of the verses goes 1, 2, 3, 5. Wesley is learning to count, but every now and then he gets a little confused and counts something like that. Um, what happened to 4? In some older versions of the Bible you will see a verse 4. It said, “From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each disturbance would be cured of whatever disease he had.” Most scholars today believe that was not part of John’s original gospel. Evidence from the best manuscripts indicates this was something added later as a way to explain what the invalid says in verse 7.

The explanation added later after John wrote tells us that supposedly at various times an angel stirred up the water of the pool of Bethesda and when that happened the first person who got into the water would be healed. The problem with this is it was pure superstition. The pool likely was fed by springs that occasionally might stir up the water. The superstitious attributed this to an angel.

This passage gives evidence of two tendencies of religious people. We clearly are religious people, or we wouldn’t be here today. So it makes sense for us to be aware of these tendencies, because they are both negative. One of those tendencies is to be superstitious.

There is no evidence that anyone ever got healed at that pool, but people superstitiously and stubbornly continued to believe the story. The legend actually didn’t even make much sense. Is God really going to turn a healing opportunity into a competition? First one in the pool wins! That’s downright cruel. Hey paralyzed dude, here’s your chance, all you have to do is beat the blind guy into the water. I’m pretty sure if it were in our society today somebody would have sued God over that one.

There are still places that people claim you can go and be miraculously healed. The problem with these claims is that there are countless sick people in the world, people in need of real healing. If these places actually provided miracle healing they would be overrun with people seeking help. I could use some healing right now, but I’m not going to Lourdes in France because it would be a waste of time and money.

Well of course not, because you don’t believe. You don’t have faith. I don’t have faith because I know it’s not true. The problem for religious people is that we believe in a God we cannot see. We believe in the supernatural. Unfortunately it is a very small step from the supernatural to the superstitious.

What’s the difference? It is somewhat in the eye of the beholder. For instance, there are people who think what we believe is superstition. But there are some things that differentiate the two. Superstition is not grounded in God’s revealed truth. It may be slightly related to it, but you won’t find the superstition directly in God’s Word. It also usually contains no moral element, where belief in the supernatural God does. Superstition often is an attempt to use influences or powers to protect oneself, or to wield those influences in one’s favor.

Athletes are often a little superstitious. They wear the same socks or the same undershirt when they are on a hot streak or they go through exactly the same ritual each game day. The person who wears a cross in the belief it will ward off evil, or writes Bible verses and puts them in places around their house to fend off demons is being superstitious. I have encountered many Christians who were superstitious, and quite a few non believers as well. There was no angel stirring the water, but that didn’t stop people from stubbornly believing it.

Jesus singled out a man who is described as an invalid. John didn’t tell us the exact nature of his disability, only that it had incapacitated him for 38 years. Clearly this was not merely a bum knee or a bad back. He was out of commission for almost 4 decades. Jesus asked him if he wanted to get well. That seems an obvious question, but I believe it was Jesus’ way of opening a conversation with him that implied Jesus could do something about his situation.

The man responded with an explanation for why he hadn’t been healed. Because he was immobile somebody always beat him to it when the water was stirred up. The man’s response amounted to, “Of course I want to get well. That’s why I’m here. I’m frustrated and discouraged because I can never do what I need to do in order to be healed.”

Jesus didn’t mess around. This was one of those classic moments from the story of his life. He told the man, “Get up, pick up your mat, and walk.” And the guy did just that. Somehow he knew instantly that whatever problem he had, it was gone. He stood up for the first time in many years, rolled up his mat and walked away!

The message of this incident is the same as we saw at the end of chapter 4 where Jesus instantly healed a dying child. All it took was for him to say the word and the suffering person was instantly healed. Jesus had power over nature itself. Oh, that’s just superstition. This is a myth, a legend. I might think that too, except John saw it happen. He was there. He saw the man get up and walk. Well he could have made up the story, or embellished it. Yes, he could have. But what did that get him? It got him persecuted, tortured and finally exiled. He gained nothing but bad from it. He was willing to experience the consequences of that because what he had seen was literally life changing for him and everyone else.

But that’s impossible! Yes, it is. That’s kind of the point. By doing the possible Jesus would only have established the fact that he was competent. By doing the impossible he was making the point that he was far more than competent, and he was far more than your average human. Remember John’s claim in the first chapter was that Jesus was the creator of all revealing himself in a form we can understand, a human being. He claimed that this creator spoke and worlds, galaxies, the universe, creatures, humans came into being. If that’s true, is it hard to believe that he could speak and fix some defect in a person? Generally if you can make it, you can fix it.

JESUS HAD CONFLICT WITH RELIGIOUS LEADERS

This seems like a great story that would cause everyone to marvel and rejoice. However, religious people got involved, and they’re not generally known for their glee. The end of verse 9 says, “the day on which this took place was a Sabbath.” Uh oh. That’s trouble.

Some religious leaders spot this newly healed man walking home and carrying his mat. That’s where the problem crops up. One of the 10 commandments was that you must keep the Sabbath holy. What does that mean? I could make a case that being healed and being able to do something you hadn’t been able to do for decades is a way of making the Sabbath holy. To be holy is to be set apart. What could set apart the Sabbath more than being healed on it and doing something you hadn’t been able to do most of your life?

The Jewish religious leaders did not buy that argument. God said part of keeping the Sabbath holy is not doing the same work on the Sabbath that you do every other day. The religious leaders felt that left too much gray area. They decided they had to delineate what not working on the Sabbath meant. Carrying stuff around was, in their minds, work. So when they saw this poor man carrying his mat they immediately stopped him in order to cite him for violating the Sabbath.

Doesn’t that seem like a ticky-tack foul to you? It feels to me like one of those instances in football where a defensive back gets called for pass interference when he barely touched a receiver. Apparently pass interference can be invading someone’s personal space. Carrying your mat home for the first time in 38 years after being miraculously healed doesn’t seem to me like such a big offense that God would rank it in there with murder and adultery as part of the Big Ten. Yet that was what the religious leaders insisted.

Gary Burge wrote a prominent commentary on John. In it he related that while writing the book he had visited Israel. He was near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem on a Sabbath. He wanted to take a picture so he got his camera and as he was about to snap the picture a passerby yelled at him to stop and put his hand in front of the lens. The man said that pushing the shutter button on the camera was work, and must not be done on the Sabbath. Yeah, that makes sense. God says, here are the biggest rules for you. Don’t steal from people, don’t kill anyone, don’t cheat on your spouse, and don’t push that little button on your camera on the Sabbath. Which one of those is not like the others?

The poor former invalid was having the best day of his life until the religious people rained on it. An awesome miracle had just changed this man’s life. It was a powerful work of God, and the religious leaders were upset because it violated one of their interpretations of how to apply a law of God. Early in December, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright accomplished a first in human history when their Wright Flyer was able to achieve powered flight, and changed the world. Shortly after that they sent a telegram to their sister back in Ohio informing her that their invention had worked and flown for 120 feet. Then they told her they hoped to be home by Christmas. She was excited and showed the telegram to the home town newspaper editor. He put a small article in his paper informing all that the Wright boys would be coming home for Christmas. Um, kind of missed the big point, don’t you think? So did the religious leaders of Israel that day.

When confronted by the leaders and fearing he was in trouble, the healed man did a very human thing, something we’ve been doing since Adam said, “Well, the woman you gave me…” He tried to shift the blame for his transgression. “I’m just carrying my mat because the guy who healed me told me to.” The religion police wanted to know who that was, but this guy had no clue. Jesus healed him, then faded into the crowd. The man he healed had never seen him before so he couldn’t tell the religious guys anything about him. However, later Jesus found him and said to him, “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” He wasn’t saying the man had been crippled because of his sin. He meant that there are worse things that can happen than being physically handicapped. He meant there is a spiritual peril much worse, and he needed to stay away from that.

The man then told the religious leaders it was Jesus who healed him. We don’t know why he did that. I suspect it was because he thought they would want to know this man who had the power to heal. But that led to the leaders opposing and persecuting Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath, which they said was work, thus a violation of it, and because he told the man to work on the sabbath.

Here is a second tendency of religious people. They tend to focus on the wrong things. In fact, often their lives seem to be adventures in missing the point. Only supernatural power could heal that man, the power of God. This was something to wonder at and rejoice over. Decades of illness, marginalization, poverty and misery for this poor man were gone in an instant. God’s kindness and mercy were showered on him. The power of God was displayed among them. This was astounding and great. Yet their response was to get upset with Jesus because he violated their rules about what it means to keep the Sabbath holy. They totally missed the much larger point. They were so focused not even on the trees, but on the on the weeds under the trees, that they missed the forest.

Why did Jesus seek that man out to identify himself, knowing the likely result was this confrontation with the spiritual leaders? We don’t know because John doesn’t tell us. So I’m going to speculate. That’s all this is, my speculation, but I suspect Jesus deliberately provoked this confrontation with the religious leaders. It is going to force them to make some decisions about him. They could not just ignore him.

Jesus responded to their accusations that he was violating the Sabbath and encouraging others to do so by saying, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” In what way is the Father always at work? Genesis 2:2-3 says, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done.”

Verse 3 is an important clarification. It says that God rested from the work of creating. Did he rest from all that he does? No. Colossians 1:16 says that all things were made through Christ. Then verse 17 says, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” He holds the entirety of creation, the whole universe, together. Did he stop doing that on that seventh day? No, he continues to do that even to this very moment. He does that work, even on the Sabbath.

He continues to pour out his goodness, to provide that which sustains our lives, to give his light, to work in people’s hearts all day every day, including the Sabbath. That’s what Jesus meant when he said the Father is always at work to this very day. Dr. D. A. Carson says in his excellent commentary on John, “The consensus among rabbis…was that God works on the Sabbath, for otherwise providence itself would…go into abeyance.” In other words, life would cease to exist.

The rabbis couldn’t deny that point, but they also got the implication. Jesus was saying he was doing the same thing God does, which, he actually was. Verse 18 says, “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God is own Father, making himself equal with God.” That was precisely what Jesus was doing. I think that was the whole point of this incident. Jesus specifically provoked it because he wanted to confront the leaders of his people with that claim. That was why he performed the miracle, because it backed up his claim.

This was not the only time he made a claim like this. In Luke 6 Jesus’s followers were picking some grain to eat as they went through a grainfield on the Sabbath. The Pharisees said they were breaking the Sabbath. Jesus answered with an example from the Old Testament how David and his men ate some bread only priests were supposed to eat and it was all right with God. But then he made this incendiary statement in verse 5, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

He claimed he was the Lord of the Sabbath, meaning he determines what keeping it holy means. Claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath was saying that he was God! The religious leaders understood him correctly. He was claiming to be the God of Israel!

APPLICATION

DON’T DO THOSE RELIGIOUS THINGS

By that I mean don’t fall prey to those tendencies so common to religious people. Don’t get sucked in to superstitions, and don’t get focused on the trivial and miss the main point. Yes, we have faith and believe in the supernatural, but that doesn’t mean we should put our brains in a locker and not use them, becoming gullible and falling for every bizarre and superstitious idea. God has given us sound minds, and he wants us to use them. Make no mistake, the enemy wants to sidetrack us, and one curious way he can do that is with distraction. Get us believing in every kind of superstition so we lose track of what’s really important and end up looking foolish to the world.

The other mistake is to focus on what doesn’t matter and lose sight of what does. When I graduated from college I went to work for a ministry to college students. I worked mainly at Long Beach State, but the last couple of years I spent one day a week helping a guy who had begun a ministry on campus at a community college not far away. The ministry boomed and he needed some help. One day he asked me to speak on the campus, so I gave a talk at a large room that was packed with students, both Christians and some non-believers who were interested. I was giving my talk when a student raised his hand indicating he wanted to say something. I felt the best way to handle it was to acknowledge him and deal with whatever his question was as quickly as possible. So I said, “Yes, you have something you want to ask?” He said, “Do you believe in using musical instruments in worship?” I was completely caught off guard. I had no idea why he was asking that and it had absolutely no relation to the topic I was addressing. I thought I must have misunderstood him, so I said, “I’m sorry, what?” He repeated his question. I said, “I’m not sure why you’re asking that, but that’s completely off the topic, so why don’t we talk after this meeting?” He insisted I answer his question. I told him as politely and as firmly as possible that I was not going to do that because it was not germane to the topic and I wasn’t going to take up the other students’ time answering a question they had no interest in.

What happened there? He was from a church that had a doctrine that worship should be done without instruments. To this day I wonder if the people in that church have read the Psalms. But the main point here is that kid was so focused on something that is trivial that it was more important to him than the fact that we were reaching students on a secular campus with the gospel. He was so focused on the weeds he couldn’t seem to see the forest. That was a rather odd example, but there are many Christians who get focused on all the wrong things. The classic example is the person who has every doctrine down pat, but who treats people harshly and rigidly, who is unloving and unkind.

There are entire ministries whose focus is on prophecy and the end times. They have their interpretations of ambiguous prophetic passages of Scripture and they match those up with current events in order to get everyone revved up because it proves that Jesus’ coming is just about to happen. I’ve heard that before. The first time I heard it was 1968. I was in high school and it seemed the Rapture was certain to occur right now. World events fulfilling prophecies proved it! My brother was away at college. We had some bizarre weather in Bakersfield including an electrical storm with lots of lightning and no rain. That never happened in Bakersfield. That night I got home late after a baseball game. When I got home the lights were on in our house and the door was unlocked, but no one was there. My parents *never* left the house unlocked. And they were supposed to be home. They hadn’t said they were going to be gone. Where were they? And then it hit me. The rapture had happened, and I’d been left behind! It turned out the Rapture hadn’t happened. My parents had gone next door and were visiting with our neighbors, the Ottos.

Here’s the thing about all that end times stuff. Go back through history and you will see that Christians repeatedly get focused on it, and they have always been wrong and are usually distracted. In his most extensive discussion of the end times Jesus said in Matthew 24:36, “About that day or hour no one knows.” His consistent emphasis was not that we should try to look for signs that he was about to come. Quite the opposite. Instead, we should know he could come at any time and be ready always. So my suggestion for believers is, why don’t we try doing what Jesus said we should do? In which case our emphasis will not be on prophecy and end times, but on walking with him each day so we’re ready.

Let’s keep the main things the main things. Fine but what are those main things that we should focus on? Here are 4 ideas. Jesus is Lord, put faith in him. We are saved by grace alone. The most important thing is loving God above all else. The second most important is loving other people. Let’s make having faith in the Lord Jesus, trusting we are saved by grace in him, loving God with all our being, and loving other people what we are all about and we can’t go wrong. If we start focusing on anything else, we will be heading down a rabbit trail.

DON’T GIVE IN TO DESPAIR

An obvious lesson from this incident is that Jesus has power. He has the ability to heal. Later we will see he has power over nature, even over death. So there is great reason for us to live in hope. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is with you today, and he has that power, the power that created the universe. So because he is with you, there is always hope.

God doesn’t work on our timetable. That’s why you see a number of passages in the Bible that tell us to wait on the Lord. I sometimes think of Mary and what she went through. She had those startling events when an angel appeared to her, then she became miraculously pregnant. Then an angel appeared to Joseph. When the baby was born shepherds came and worshiped him. Influential men from Persia came and brought gifts. The Bible says she treasured these things in her heart. But for the next 30 years nothing much happened. She had to wait. Abraham and Sarah waited for decades before God finally fulfilled his promise and gave them a son. In this story this poor man waited 38 years before Jesus healed him.

There are going to be times when God doesn’t seem to be doing anything. We need to not give up and become hopeless. This story reminds us that because Jesus is with us there is always hope. So wait on the Lord.

TRUST GOD’S SOVEREIGN WILL

We must be careful, though, about presuming how he will use his power. Many Christians insist that because God has the power to heal, it is his will to always heal us. All we need is faith and we can claim our healing. But there is something in this passage that should cause us to question that. Verse 3 says at the pool called Bethesda the day Jesus showed up there was a great number of sick people there. The Greek word translated “great number” was plethos. It is the root of our word plethora. There was a plethora there, a big crowd, all hoping for healing. How many of them did Jesus heal? One. That’s it. Just one.

I’m pretty sure if I’d been there I would have been thinking, “Hey, what about me? What’s so special about that guy?” Why did Jesus only heal the one guy? Why didn’t he help all those other people? Was there something wrong with them? Did they not have enough faith? That doesn’t make much sense because the guy he did heal exhibited no particular faith in Jesus. He just stood up when Jesus told him to because he could actually do it.

Why did Jesus change water into wine at a wedding? Why did he make a point to talk to one poor, used woman with a sketchy reputation in a Samaritan town? Why heal one dying child and not others? Why heal this one man and no one else in the plethora that day? There are no answers to those questions that are accessible to finite human minds. God had his reasons and his plans. He doesn’t explain them to us. He only asks us to trust him and his plans and purposes.

This is a crucial principle for us to live by, for all of us are going to run head on into the question of why or why not at some point. Laurie and I had a challenging week. Monday morning Laurie had an appointment with a doctor to have him cut out some skin cancer that he had diagnosed on her ear lobe. She was a bit apprehensive about it, but not much. We both have had skin cancers removed, and we know it is not fun, but it’s not a huge deal. It will be uncomfortable for a few hours, but it will get better quickly. We got just a bit behind so we were hurrying. In the rush I somehow managed to slam the car door on my thumb. Oh, man, I can’t begin to tell you how badly that hurt. I haven’t done that since I was a kid. But we didn’t have time to mess with it. The thumb was a bloody mess, but we put a bandaid on it and headed to the doctor’s office. I sat there in the waiting room with my thumb screaming at me, trying to not cry like a little girl. Smashing a thumb like that would be a very effective enhanced interrogation technique. Having a smashed thumb made life harder for me. That thing of opposable thumbs is a really good idea. But my damaged thumb was useless. Even slight pressure caused bolts of pain, so all week simple tasks like tying my shoes or buttoning a shirt became big challenges.

They were doing Moh’s surgery on Laurie where they cut some out then send the tissue to the lab. They check to see if they got all the cancer. I figured this might take an hour and a half or so. I wasn’t close. They had to come back repeatedly and cut more out. We were there 5 hours. I started getting concerned that Laurie was going to be completely missing an ear.

It was a tough morning. Laurie didn’t end up with just a little discomfort. She was in excruciating pain for a couple of days. I was hurting pretty badly. On top of all the stuff I’m dealing with it felt like God was piling on. Maybe he needed a flag for a personal foul, unnecessary roughness. Laurie tried to help the situation by making repeated references to thumbs. If I asked if something was all right she would say, “Thumbs up.” When I dropped something she’d say, “Rick, you’re all thumbs,” and then laugh. She gave me a new nickname. Tom Thumb. So I began calling her Van Gogh. Like I said, the whole week was kind of tough. It was easy to ask why, Lord? This was a week we had to trust that God has a sovereign plan even in times like this.

Why was our first son born with a serious defect and why didn’t God just heal him? Why do I have the stupid disease I have and why hasn’t God just healed it? I don’t have the answers to those questions any more than you have the answers to the why questions in your life. What we must do is trust in the character of God. We know he is good, he is love, he is wise, he is just and he is powerful. We put our trust in that and let that be the answer to all of the why questions.

WORSHIP THE LORD

One more obvious thing we see in this passage is that Jesus clearly did make himself out to be equal with God. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the creator and the Lord of all.

Our response to him should be to bow before him in humility and to give him all the honor and glory and praise that he deserves. We do that by letting him be Lord of our lives, every aspect of them. And by seeking to bring him glory in everything we do and everything we say. We are to be like Job, who responded to horrific tragedy in his life by saying, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”