

Easter 6, Yr. C

May 26, 2019

John 5:1-9

Last Sunday, we heard from three people who are involved in what I would call Gospel initiatives here in Door County – Anne talked about celebrating and caring for our waters, Tom talked about legal aid for those unable to afford it and Diana talked about the effort to get affordable housing here in the county. But as I was listening, I remembered an earlier conversation with some ministerial types who said that there was a first question that needed to be asked around such initiatives, indeed around all efforts to construct a more just and equitable society and that question was **WHY SHOULD WE CARE?** And that, I thought, was a pretty basic question. Why **SHOULD** we care? The Bible, indeed, the Christian way of life, asks us some pretty penetrating questions. I'd like to structure today's time together around several of those questions.

There's a question in this morning's Gospel. Jesus comes to the Pool of Bethesda and sees a man who has been there for 38 years, hoping to be healed.

Legend had it that once in a while an angel would come down and stir up the waters of the pool and then some of the people who could get into the water right after that would be cured. Jesus asks what one would think would be a very obvious question: DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL? Wouldn't you think the response would be an enthusiastic YES? But it's not; rather the man gives an explanation of why he hasn't been able to get to the water in time. Perhaps in today's language, we would say that he's been left behind in the competitive scramble. So one wonders at the response. Why not a simple YES? Has he been there so long that he thinks the whole thing is impossible? Has the whole thing taken just too much energy and now it's easier to just stay there by the pool? Would it take too much energy to even think about what he has come to see as impossible?

That's an interesting question and it's an interesting healing. The man doesn't ask for healing, doesn't appear to have any faith, doesn't even know who Jesus is.

If we go a bit deeper into John's Gospel, it's good to remember that, for John, to be made WELL is to be made WHOLE. A whole human being, fully alive, living a life that exhibits the abundant life that God desires for all creation. So it's not just a question of physical healing, but of the kind of wholeness that exhibits God's intention. Remember St. Irenaeus' quote that God's glory is a human being fully alive. And Jesus is the perfect example of what that looks like. It can be daunting to think that our lives need to be modeled on the life of Christ. I remember reading a story about two little boys whose mother was making pancakes and there was a bit of a struggle over who should get the first one. The mother reminded them that Jesus would not have insisted on the first pancake, but would have offered it to someone else. One of the boys spoke up quickly and said to his brother: OK, Ryan, you be Jesus.

So that's the next question. What does God want? What has God wanted from the beginning? If we go back to the Genesis story, we see that God wants loving relationships – first of all in the relationship between God and each human being, then between

and among humans and then between humans and all creation. The original movement is blessing and invitation. God puts the humans in the Garden, you'll remember to till and to keep it. It's an invitation to live as responsible co-creators with God. The Bible tells us that that was the original intent, but the project ran off the rails pretty quickly. And the break in the relationship with God that was caused by the humans' sin meant that instead of walking with God in the garden in the cool of the evening, as Genesis puts it, now the humans are hiding from God. And there's a question there, as well. In fact, it's the first statement of God to the humans God created: WHERE ARE YOU?

Wherever we are now, we're meant to be those co-creators, moving toward the vision set out in the reading from Revelation, when God's original intent will finally be realized – no tears, no gates, no suffering. It's clear that we're not there yet; we're in that in-between place, taking on the responsibility of being those co-creators. That word "responsibility" really just means the ability to respond. And here it's the ability to respond to the implications of the vocation we're given. Rabbi Jonathon Sacks says it

this way: We're here to make a difference, to mend a fractured world, one day at a time, one act at a time, for as long as it takes to make the world a place of justice and compassion. In other words, we're here to answer that question, WHERE ARE YOU, by saying HERE I AM, LORD, I COME TO DO YOUR WILL – saying that in both word and action.

Thinking about that statement – one day at a time, one act at a time. I know that that's right, although there's something in me that would simply like all the suffering, all the problems wiped away, corrected, fixed in one fell swoop. But I'm reminded here of the story told by Loren Easley about the fellow at seashore who was picking up starfish stranded by the receding tide and throwing them back into the sea, one by one. When he was asked why he was doing that, he said that the starfish would die if left exposed on the beach. "But," his questioner said, "the beach goes on for miles and miles and there are thousands of starfish. You can't save them all – how can your effort make a difference? And the reply was simply, "To this one, it makes all the difference." One day at a time, one act at a time, each one healing a fracture in the broken world.

To go back to the question about why we should care, I think there are a number of answers, but two of them loom large in my mind. The first one is that for us who are following the path of Christ, it's what we are called to do, it's who we profess to be. We remember that other question that Jesus put to Peter after the resurrection: DO YOU LOVE ME? And when Peter said that he surely did, Jesus responded by saying, THEN FEED MY SHEEP.

But there's another answer as well, which is less about love and altruism and more about enlightened self interest. We take care of the water and the environment so that we and our grandchildren will have a safe and healthy place to live. We take care of those who need affordable housing so that we'll have the workforce necessary to maintain Door County as we know and love it. Perhaps I already told you the story of the Methodist church in the Dallas area that purchased a mobile medical clinic to follow migrant workers as they picked crops in south Texas. It turned out that a number of those workers were suffering from tuberculosis and, if they got treatment at all, they moved on before they could complete it, or finish the necessary medications. As

a result, a drug-resistant form of TB was increasing. The action of that church fell into both categories: self-interest, but also following the loving way of Christ, who asks that we care for all his sheep and lambs. It's like the story of the man in the boat who begins to drill a hole under his seat. His fellow passengers protested. "What concern is it of yours?" he asked. "The hole is under my seat, not yours." And the response: "That is so, but when the water comes in and the boat sinks, we'll drown with you." That speaks to the simple but very basic fact that we are all in this together. That there's a common good that cannot be ignored if we are going to build a just and compassionate society.

Today is Memorial Day when we remember all those men and women who fought and died for that common good, moving beyond their own self-interest to care for us all. A final thought along that same line – I believe it was Benjamin Franklin who, at the time of the American Revolution, reminded his compatriots that they had to hang together or assuredly they would hang separately.

Let's let him have the last word. Amen.

