

Virtual Worship Service for Kelham Baptist, Sunday Morning, March 29, 2020

Text: John 5:1-18, "Compassion and Condemnation"

Call to Worship: "It Took a Miracle"

<https://youtu.be/2KPhHhZcWwc>

Song: "No One Ever Cared for Me Like Jesus"

<https://youtu.be/CFW8H1fS7HM>

Song: "He Touched Me"

<https://youtu.be/fw41Fw773Ew>

We call feeling the pain of another "compassion." It comes from two Latin roots, "com," meaning together, and "passion," which contains the idea of . "Compassion" is thus suffering together with another. The word is used in the King James of Pharaoh's daughter when she heard the baby Moses weeping at the moment she opened the ark of bulrushes in Exodus 2:6. The Hebrew there can describe "the emotion leading (or tending to lead) to the action of sparing, the basic meaning of the Hebrew word. In Matthew 9:36, we read of Jesus, "when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." "Moved with compassion" translates one Greek verb, "to have the bowels yearn," picturing the gut feeling of sympathy and pity toward another and his or her situation. The word "compassion" does not

appear in the story John recounts in John 5, but it is the evident backdrop. Jesus saw a man with a long-standing disability and acted miraculously to make the man whole. In so doing, Jesus showed His identity as God, as we shall see as the passage develops. He also openly declared His identity as God in working on the Sabbath.

In Exodus 34:5-7, God “proclaimed the name of the LORD” to Moses. A name in ancient cultures signified far more than a mere identifier, like Bob or Mary, as it often is in modern culture. A name was a statement of essence. We can see that in God’s changing the name of Abram (meaning “exalted father”) to Abraham (meaning “father of a multitude”) after He announced the birth of Isaac to him (Gen. 17:5-6). It also lies behind God’s transformation of Jacob (“heel grabber,” Gen. 25:26) to Israel (“prince of God,” Gen. 32:28). In the New Testament, we have the examples of Simon (who became Peter, Matt. 16:17-18) and Saul (changed to Paul, Acts 13:9).

In God’s proclamation of His name, and thus His character, or essence, to Moses, He said, “The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth” (Exod. 34:6). “Merciful” translates a Hebrew word that can also mean “compassionate.” The root of the word means to love deeply, and one form of it is used to describe the womb. God proclaims Himself as loving deeply, like the love of a mother. Jesus proclaimed this love for Jerusalem before the cross in Matthew 23:37 using the imagery of a mother hen and her chicks—“ O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not!”

After Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well and the healing of the nobleman's servant at a distance, John described "a feast of the Jews" (John 5:1). Some scholars point out this strongly indicates the temple had already been destroyed, placing John's writing clearly after AD 70. The real import, however, I think of this phrase is likely to express the emptiness of what had originally been a divinely ordained event to point to Messiah. After He had completed His work of Sin-Bearing, it was merely "a fest of the Jews."

We do not know which feast it was. Some manuscripts say "*the* feast of the Jews," which would make it Passover. Other scholars suggest Purim, while still others suggest it was Pentecost (Harvest) because Tabernacles is mentioned in John 7:2 and the feast of Dedication (Hanukkah, or Lights,) which followed, is mentioned in 10:22. When Jesus was in Jerusalem He either entered through the Sheep Gate (Neh. 3:1, 12:39) or found Himself there. (For more information, take it for what it's worth, and a map: <http://jesusplusnothing.com/studies/online/nehem3.htm>). John explains there was a "pool" (John 5:2) called "Bethesda," which he explained was a Hebrew name. The word comes from "*Beth*," house, and "*Hesed*," mercy, or grace. This was the house of mercy or grace, a place of compassion. John tells us it had "five porches." Why is that significant? Despite the fact that the number 5 speaks of God's goodness and grace upon humanity in most Biblical numerological schemes, there is nothing contrived in John's reporting that there were five porches. There actually were five "porches," a word that signifies an interior colonnade or piazza. John was intimately familiar with the place. Such marks of familiarity with geography and what-not are common in John.

We cannot fathom the vast numbers of infirm and sick people in Jesus' world. The state of medicine was abysmal. We enjoy today medical practices and treatments that even Colonial America would find miraculous. During the Yellow Fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War, Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the nation's preeminent physicians treated patients by bleeding them. Superstition and folk medicine ruled the world for millennia. Around the Pool of Bethesda, "lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, and withered." "Impotent" translates a word for general weakness or feebleness, and the specific conditions follow: "blind," "halt" (a word meaning limping or crippled or lame), and "withered," shrunken, or dried up. Eye disease was common in the Middle East, what with sand, scorching heat, and ample small insects. Glasses were unknown. The number of blind people we encounter in the gospels reflects the poor condition of eye health. "Halt" could be any kind of crippling injury or disease. Without doctors to properly set bones, healing did not always progress properly, misaligning feet, joints, and knees. "Withered" could signify atrophied limbs as a result of injury or even stroke. Included might be those with various paralyzing diseases or conditions of whatever kind. The place was packed with suffering people. Imagine the scene—perhaps hundreds of sick and miserable people crowded together around the Pool of Bethesda. Sanitation was likely not the best.

John tells us they were "waiting for the moving of the water" (John 5:3) a seemingly inexplicable phrase apart from verse 4. Some manuscripts do not contain either that phrase or the fourth verse. John Gill wrote, "I think there is no *sufficient* evidence against their authenticity." We must explain somehow the large gathering of suffering persons here. Something must have happened at some time. And it must have happened more

than once for the large crowds, John says “a great multitude” (5:3). John explained “an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.” Whatever the background, in any case the situation provided Jesus with an opportunity to heal, forgive, and reveal Himself.

John, as he has before, focuses on “a certain man” (John 5:5) who “had an infirmity thirty and eight years.” Again, note John’s specificity—thirty-eight years. Had John talked with him? We do not know. “Infirmity” translates the same word as “impotent” in verse 3, weakness of some kind. Whatever the infirmity was, it prevented the man from moving himself rapidly—perhaps it was some kind of paralysis. Verse 7 indicates the man had to be “put” into the pool. The word literally pictures being thrown. This man had suffered almost forty years with a debilitating condition that threw him on the mercy of others. There was no public support system for someone like this. He would have been dependent upon his family (if any were living) or friends for food, shelter, and clothing. It could not help but foster an attitude of dependence and helplessness.

Jesus’ question in verse 6 might strike us as strange: “Wilt thou be made whole?” Do you want to be healed? John told us Jesus “knew that he had been now a long time” in his situation. Whether it was supernatural knowledge or observation, we do not know. Jesus knows things other don’t. Just as He knew the thoughts of Jewish opponents on more than one situation, just as He knew the life situation of the woman at the well. “Wilt thou be made whole” was likely designed to stir the man from his apparently hopeless situation. A person in a desperate situation will grasp any semblance of hope, and this

Jesus offered merely by His question. The man likely had not thought of being made whole for some time, despite his presence at the healing pool.

This man had no advocate, no one to follow the prescribed pattern of getting him in the pool first after the water was stirred up. He explained that while he haltingly made his way to the pool, “another steppeth down before him” (John 7:7). His hopelessness and despair come through pointedly. Jesus then told the man to do something impossible: “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk” (vs. 8). Preposterous. Unbelievable. Impossible. “Get up,” a command, right now. Pick up your “bed,” another command. “Walk,” another command, but this time continuous action is commanded—“go on walking.” If Jesus were anyone else, this would have been cruel. It would sound insensitive and dismissive of the man’s problems—as if he could have done that any time he wanted. But He is Jesus. With the command came the power. With the words came the healing.

“Immediately” (John 5:9), directly, at once, “the man was made whole.” Thirty-eight years of sickness and weakness disappeared in the blink of an eye. He “took up his bed, and walked.” Most of us cannot imagine what that man must have felt. We walk around all the time without a thought. Yet someone in a wheelchair or confined to a bed understands that liberation. Imagine always having to look up at people. Imagine having to be helped with normal everyday tasks life. All that changed in an instant. The man didn’t need to learn to walk again (if he ever had walked). Instantly, balance, strength, stability were all present. No rehab was necessary—there was complete and immediate healing. But there is more here, as we shall see.

At the end of verse 9, John tells us, “on the same day was the sabbath” (John 5). To most of us, that means little or nothing. To someone in John’s day, however, there were a lot of implications. Here is this formerly paralyzed, now healed man, carrying what was likely a bundle of cloth, his “bed.” The Jewish leaders, impressed not a whit with the healing, accused him of violating the Sabbath: “It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.” The Ten Commandments prohibits work on the Sabbath day (Exod. 20:8-11). Jewish scholars wrote for years to define “work” (vs. 11). They had created a fence around the Law, adding human definitions and caveats, supposedly to keep people from violating the Law. The *Mishnah*, the collected oral traditions of the rabbis, lists thirty-nine categories (and hundreds of subcategories) of prohibited work on the Sabbath. The whole first book of the collected oral traditions (*Mishnah*) deals with the Sabbath and contains twenty-four separate chapters. The very first chapter was on “carrying,” and this healed man had violated that oral tradition. If you read some of the discussions, you will find incredibly detailed rationales of what constituted work and what did not. For example, you could not put vinegar on a sore tooth on the Sabbath to take away the pain. But you could put vinegar on your food and rest that on the sore tooth to take away the pain. Legalism works that way. It rationalizes. Jesus attacked this heart attitude numerous times (read Mark 7:9-13 for one example in which they made void God’s Law by their traditions).

When confronted, the man shifted responsibility to Jesus: “He that made me whole, the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk” (John 5:12). The man did not know who Jesus was. He did not even know His name. Gill noted, “The poor man reasoned conclusively:—He who could work such a miracle must be at least the best of men: now

a good man will neither do well himself, nor command others to do it: but he who cured me ordered me to carry my bed; therefore, there can be no evil in it.” Anybody who could do a miracle like Jesus had done surely has some kind of power and authority. That One told me. He quoted Jesus’ words exactly.

In what looks like the beginning of an official inquiry, the Jewish leaders pursued the man: “What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?” Their focus was not on the miraculous healing but on what they saw as a command to violate their Sabbath tradition. “Who is the man?” they asked.

The man was ignorant: He “wist not who it was” (vs. 13). Jesus had “conveyed himself away,” a verb that indicates to slip out or turn the head to the side. Jesus had slipped away from the crowd teeming around the Pool of Bethesda and gone to the temple (vs. 14). The man also went to the temple, a noteworthy fact. After taking his bed home, the man headed to the temple. He knew that the mercy of God had worked in his life and had evidently gone to the temple most likely to thank God for his healing. In the temple Jesus “findeth” him, a dramatic present tense—“Jesus finds him.” There Jesus confirmed the man’s healing, “thou art made whole,” and exhorts him to “sin no more.” No longer go on sinning, Jesus said, using the same words he used in the case of the woman taken in adultery in John 8:11. This would indicate that the man’s physical situation had been the result of personal sin. It also indicates forgiveness, for if the cause be lifted, the symptoms do too. “All sickness is not due to personal sin,” A.T. Robertson noted, referencing the man born blind in John 9:3. Some sin is, however, a result of personal sin, something we may find difficult to grasp. First Corinthians 11:30 Paul indicated that some of the Corinthians had suffered physical consequences from sin. This man’s

sickness evidently was the result of sin. Speculation of any sort is fruitless here. Gill noted that Jesus revealed to the man that He knew the secrets of his past. Surely the man must have thought, “Who is This?” Jesus warned him of the future—“lest a worse thing come unto thee” (vs. 14). God knows all our secrets.

The man then went and found the Jewish leaders and told them the identity of the One who healed him. Whether this was because the man thought the Jewish leaders honestly wanted to speak with the One who healed him is not clear. Robertson suggests this was to clear himself with them and avoid possible future penalty (excommunication from the synagogue as in John 9:22 with the parents of the man born blind) from them for his violation of Sabbath law. This may be doubtful, for John tells us merely that he “told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole” (vs. 15). The man did not focus on Sabbath breaking but on his healing. You and I would too. You would expect crowds to seek out Jesus after the man identified him as his Healer, but that is not what happened.

“Therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day” (John 5:16). They had been offended by Jesus earlier (2:18), were suspicious of his popularity (4:1), and now they actively pursued Him because “he had done” (the Greek is imperfect—kept on doing) things like this on the Sabbath day. Jesus then asserted He was acting in harmony with “My Father” (John 5:17). “Worketh hitherto” translates a present tense—is working until now. God does not take a day off on the Sabbath. His mercy, His grace, His work continues. God made the Sabbath for man, not man for the Sabbath. By saying “and I work” Jesus had equated Himself with God.

This was more than the Jews could bear. They “sought the more to kill him.” “Sought” is

another imperfect tense, “were seeking,” or “kept on seeking.” John used the phrase in 7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40. Their determined course was to kill Him off and be rid of Him. Jesus’ Sabbath breaking offended them. His “making himself equal with God” was more than they could endure. The law required the death penalty (Lev. 24:11, 14, 16). The Jewish leaders did not misunderstand Jesus or take His words out of context. They knew He was claiming to be equal with God in nature and power. He wanted them to know clearly and openly that the Father’s work was His work. If Jesus had not been who He said He was, this would have been blasphemy. But it was not. They refused to see what was right before their eyes. The formerly “impotent” man was now healed. Mercy triumphs over judgment, James said in James 2:13. God’s mercy worked in this man’s life. The Jewish leaders, not knowing God, did not recognize His work in and through Jesus.

God is compassionate. It is His nature. He yearns to forgive. Peter reminded us, “The Lord ... is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). God waits patiently for the wanderer to come home. Yet this text shows us that God in the Person of His Son sought out this wanderer. He was one of a hundred, but Jesus sought him in particular. That is the mystery of grace. I once was asked what I would first ask Jesus in heaven. I said, “Why me?” None of us is righteous. We’ve all sinned. The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost. Thank God for the compassionate seeking Savior.

Closing Song: “Gentle Shepherd”

https://youtu.be/Ej5cXox_50k