

No Excuse

John 5:1-17

Cradock Presbyterian Church

March 17, 2013

It doesn't matter what era, or age, you're talking about; human beings are always making excuses for various things. Sometimes excuses are valid; other times they're attempts to shift blame. It starts when we're little: "He made me do it!" "I didn't *know!*" "I forgot!" Those of you who have raised children could add to the list.

Here in this story from John I see several instances of people making excuses for their unwillingness to understand Jesus, or to accept his gift of salvation. We might even see a little bit of "nowadays" in how they do.

There is one preliminary thing to say. Many variant texts of this passage have the following verses, which are labeled 3b-4. You won't find them in your NRSV Bibles, because the editors decided these weren't in John's original. Here's what they say: *"For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had."* Now you can understand what's going on in this passage.

In the first place, we have this man who will end up being healed. We usually think of him as a paralytic, but the text doesn't actually say that. It just says that he "had been ill for thirty-eight years," and notes that he was "lying there." It also has him talking about "making my way" down to the pool when the water was stirred up. He couldn't make his way down to the pool if he was paralyzed or lame. Since we hear later on that he didn't know who healed him, which he certainly should have known if he could see, it's probably better to assume he was blind. "Lying there" would have been the normal

thing to do for someone who was blind. Needing help to be put in the water also makes sense; trying to make his way down there without being able to see would have taken him a while, so someone else would always beat him down there.

Jesus doesn't ask him if he wants help getting into the water; Jesus simply asks, "Do you want to be made well?" Here comes excuse #1. "I have no one to help me," he says. Really? Didn't you hear what the man said? He didn't ask you if you needed help getting in the water; he asked if you wanted to be made well. He really might not have heard. His mind was so set on the pool being his only way of getting healed that he might very well have decided, Well, it'll never happen for me. Poor, pitiful me!

Did you notice that Jesus doesn't engage this line of thought? He simply says, "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." Sounds like the story of the healing of the paralytic in Mark! Maybe that's why people assume this man was paralyzed. It's just about as hard to pick up a mat and walk if you're blind. Jesus *knew* he wanted to be healed. He knew it was best for him to be healed. *Anyone* in this man's position would want to be healed. And so he was. Jesus wasn't buying into his self-pity, his being stuck on the pool as his only way to healing. He went ahead and did the healing. He did what the man needed. And what does this man do? He took off, without a word of thanks. As we will see, he was apparently not very grateful for the grace he had received. There's no excuse for that!

As he was walking along with his mat, he encountered some Pharisees. They immediately took him to task, because, after all, it was the Sabbath. You can't do anything on the Sabbath! It's against the Law! I am reminded that when Jesus healed

the man born blind, in Chapter 9 of John, that man was grateful enough to defend Jesus against the Pharisees. Not this man! Knowing that the Pharisees had him dead to rights on *doing something* on the Sabbath, he started making excuses *again*. “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” He made me do it! He wanted to squirm out of any trouble he might be in with those Pharisees. In my mind, there’s no excuse for his actions. Couldn’t he have recognized that anyone who could effect a cure like that, just by saying the words, must be from God? So why would you want to cause trouble for this man of God?

Of course, many of the Pharisees must have known this now-healed man because he’d been lying around there for thirty-eight years. They didn’t focus on that, though. They focused on his possibly being an accessory to a *crime*. “Who told you to take up your mat and walk?” – not, “Who did this wonderful thing, restoring you to full health?” To me, in the face of a miraculous event, a terrific change in fortune for this healed man, there’s no excuse for doing anything except celebrating with this guy. And yet, as we know from all the Gospels, the Pharisees were always self-justifying, always making excuses for what they did. They couldn’t see the grace in this, either. It was something apart from *their* power. Just a violation of the “laws” that they considered more important than people.

Jesus had disappeared into the crowd after doing the healing, so our man had no idea who it was. But when Jesus makes himself known to the man, and tells him to go and sin no more, what does this ingrate do? He goes and sins, all right: he tries to turn in God’s Son. What is a sin, exactly? You know where I stand! *Sin* is a *condition*; it’s the

condition of being separated from God. *Sins*, plural, are acts that further that separation. This man was being drawn close to God in the form of Jesus. But what does he do? He pushes Jesus away, in effect; he goes and tries to get in good with the Pharisees by telling them who this law-breaker was, the one who told him to carry his mat. It's a shame he didn't tell them how Jesus healed him. Again, read Chapter 9 of John for an account of a grateful man who *did* witness about Jesus to the Pharisees.

This last section of the story is a little tricky. John tells us that the Pharisees were persecuting Jesus because he was doing "these *things*" – things *plural* – on the Sabbath. That means they're including the healing as one of "these things;" they know about the healing. They had no excuse; if they were as Godly as they claimed, they should have known from the healing who Jesus was. They should have celebrated that God's work was being done on the Sabbath. Well, that wasn't going to happen. The Pharisees didn't want to deal with Jesus as the Son of God – it would have meant lots of change, lots of giving up power. So they locked onto the Sabbath thing. And they used his statements to "excuse" their plans to kill him. They had no excuse; their own Scripture told them who Jesus was.

Do you see a common theme here? Everyone's looking out for themselves. No one has opened their eyes to God in their midst. And it's a shame. Now, a good sermon usually turns it all around, and points out how we're like the folks in the Scripture, how we sometimes act the same way as the characters in the passage, and so on. You can't really do that for this story. We ourselves have never had Jesus directly walking up to us and trying to minister to us. Likewise, we've learned through the ages how not to be

“Pharisees,” so we aren’t. We ARE grateful for everything that’s been done for us. Our problem, it seems to me, is that we haven’t really opened our eyes to the immensity, the huge scope, of what Jesus has done for each one of us. We come off looking a little like ingrates! And because of all the distractions we’ve had lately, and I mean you and me and all of us who love this church, I think we haven’t been paying attention this Lenten season. And that’s too bad! What I want for all of us, for all of you, is the ability to set aside our troubles, and to focus in on Jesus for the remainder of Lent. I want us to pay attention to how clearly he set himself up for the Cross, and how he knew he was doing it for everyone. Jesus could have excused himself from his suffering and death; he even prayed about it in the Garden of Gethsemane. But he ended up with, “Not my will, but yours, Father, be done.” We have some powerful ways planned for you, to help you focus in on Jesus’ love for us, and the eternal life we now have because of that love. We’ll be worshipping here on Maundy Thursday evening, in one of the most moving services you’ll ever see. I know that’s true – I’m moved by it every time we do it, and that’s not something that happens too often for me. We’ll Walk With The Cross on Good Friday evening at 5, and fellowship with each other at our Fish Fry afterwards. Walking the streets of Cradock with his cross, hearing the story told, offering ourselves in song as well as body, will connect you with Calvary like you’ve never been connected before.

So now you know. You don’t need any help to get down here. You don’t have to worry about someone “making you do it.” You know that even though it’s different from our normal Sunday Worship, all of these things are excellent. And you know who it’s all about, because you know *him*. Unlike that man Jesus healed, we all know how to be

grateful. So let's you and I make sure to take advantage of all this season has to offer, in order both to help ourselves, and to show how thankful we are.