

## **First Come, First Served** **May 22, 2022**

I'd like to tell you a story. This story only has a beginning; I'm going to ask you to end it.

You are reading the news, and you discover that your favorite store has just announced that they will release their new, life-changing product tomorrow. You get to decide the details – maybe it's the Apple store releasing the new iPhone. Maybe it's a toy store releasing the coolest gadget. Maybe it's Sharper Image that's releasing an at-home teleportation device. This is your story.

The store says that they have a limited supply of this product, so it is available on a first-come, first-served basis. You decide that you are going to wait in line to get this new, wonderful product. That evening, you pack up a sleeping bag and gear, and you go to the store. You arrive to discover that there is already a long line of people waiting and camping out. You head to the end of the line and set up camp.

The night passes slowly; you get a couple hours of sleep. In the morning, the sun comes up. And before long, the store opens, and the line starts to move. You pack up your gear, and slowly, slowly you move forward. Finally, you get into the store, but there's still a long line between the door and the counter. After another hour, you make it to the customer service desk to buy your gadget. This is it! This is the moment you've been waiting for! Teleportation technology is within your grasp! What does the clerk behind the counter say?

“Sorry, we're sold out.” Or, “We just gave the last one to the person ahead of you in line.”

I didn't say this was going to be a good story. Just an open-ended one.

This progression is a pretty common trope in TV shows or movies. Someone waits for a long time for something, only to discover that the person ahead of her in line gets the last one. Maybe you've actually been in a situation like that. If you have, my condolences.

We have this fear that we will wait and wait for something, and then after waiting a long time, we'll discover that we can't get it. It's odd... I think we all have that fear.

And that fear was present even in Biblical times. Today, Jesus meets a man who has lived that fear and anxiety.

Our Gospel story tells us of the pool of Beth-zatha, sometimes called Bethesda or Bethsaida. Around this pool sit all kinds of folks with various ailments, diseases, and handicaps. The reason why is that there is a legend around this pool. The legend is only included in footnotes of the Bible; it's not included in the actual text. Scholars think it was added shortly after John composed his Gospel.

But the legend reads like this: *In the porticoes lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed. ... waiting for the stirring of the water. For an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into*

*the pool, and stirred up the water. Whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.*

And that gives us the context for why so many sick and handicapped folks are sitting and lying around this pool. They are waiting, waiting for the pool to be stirred up by an angel, so that they can possibly be healed.

But that healing is on a first-come, first-served basis. One person, the first person, gets healed, and everyone else is left to their own devices.

In this group of people who are biding their time waiting is a man who has been lying there for 38 years. Jesus speaks to this man. This is one of those times when I wish we could hear the tone of this conversation.

Jesus says, “Do you want to be made well?” (I can help you)

Jesus says, “Do you want to be made well?” (What have you been doing the past 38 years?)

The man replies, “I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up.” (It’s a sad tale)

The man says, “I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up!” (Woe is me; I am a helpless victim. It’s not my fault!)

What follows shows us that the 2<sup>nd</sup> option is more likely... we’ll get there in a second.

Whichever it is, the course of action is the same. Jesus tells him to get up and walk... and the man does.

Then a curious thing happens. We’re told that this healing takes place on the sabbath, and then our reading ends. The story continues though. Some people see the man walking and carrying his mat, and they say to him, “It’s the sabbath; you’re not allowed to carry your mat.”

The man responds defensively, “It’s not my fault! The man who healed me told me to pick up my mat and walk!” So the men let him go. Jesus finds that healed man later and says to him, “You have been healed. Stop sinning.” In other words, stop blaming everyone else for your problems.

So we get a better insight into this man’s personality by this second part of the story that isn’t included in our reading today. And it sheds a little bit of light on the first part, the bit about the pool of Beth-zatha, with all the folks sitting around it.

This man who couldn’t walk was sitting and waiting for a miracle. He sat and waited for 38 years, hoping that the angel would stir up the waters of the pool. The kind of interesting piece is that we don’t know if that legend was true. We don’t know if there are records of people being healed, if that man actually saw someone being healed, or if everyone is just waiting around because of a rumor of a story that will never happen. If that’s the case, it makes the story a little bit more depressing, doesn’t it?

According to this man, he is the victim. He has been waiting for 38 years, and always, the store gives the last gadget away to the person in front of it. That's his version of the story. In reality, it might be that this man has been waiting in line, and the store isn't selling anything.

In either case, Jesus changes the narrative. Jesus says, "You're healed; stop waiting around and start walking. Start living your life."

Because the Kingdom of God does not work on a first-come, first-served basis. We don't wait in line for God's grace, for healing, for wholeness. God gives it to us, in whatever form it takes (maybe not the form we want), and we are then called to go. Stop waiting and start doing. Start loving, Start listening. Start healing others.

It's also worth pointing out that this man by the pool of Beth-zatha doesn't only need healing in his body. He needs healing in his way of thinking, of painting himself as a victim. I wonder if there is a lesson in there for us. We might ask ourselves, "Do I need to be healed of an unhealthy mindset that I have? Do I have a behavior that I need to ask God to take away?" Healing isn't always physical.

I'll close with a line from one of my favorite songs. The song, called "First Day of My Life," by Bright Eyes, tells the story of a man who is struggling in a relationship. I think it's helpful for us to think about as we consider what it means to heal.

"I've rather be working for a paycheck than waiting to win the lottery."

Bright Eyes. "First Day of My Life." *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning*. Saddle Creek, 2005, CD.

Rather than waiting around for healing, may we seek to serve others and serve God, and find healing in the journey.

Amen.