

Sunday, May 26, 2019
Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year C)
Commissioning of Stephen Ministers

John 5.1-9

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And we think we have problems with access to health care. Regardless of your personal opinions on our societal debate regarding health care—HMOs, PPOs, private insurance, the Affordable Care Act, Medicare, Medi-Cal, socialized medicine, and universal health care—our frustrations with accessing health care are nothing compared to what the invalid experiences in today's Gospel reading. He obviously has a pretty lousy health care plan. He tries to get an appointment, but there are none to be had. Only walk-ins, which are treated on a first-come, first-served basis. And once that first patient walks in the door, the clinic closes for the day. Or for the week. Or until whenever the doctor decides to see patients again. Well, that's not quite what happens, but almost. And if you've ever had to wait for an appointment or for a referral from your GP or through your HMO, you know a little of the frustration the invalid is experiencing.

As we heard in our Gospel reading, Jesus is in Jerusalem and encounters an invalid at the Pool of Beth-zatha, or Bethesda as it is sometimes referred to in Scripture. He has been ill for 38 years, and during that time, he has sought healing in the only way that appears to be available to him—by going into the waters of the Pool. According to a verse that was added sometime after the original writing of John's Gospel, and which is omitted from our translation, it was believed that "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" (v. 4, footnote in the *New Interpreter's Study Bible*). Once someone went into the Pool, that was it. No one else could be healed until the next time the waters were stirred up. Which, truth be told, was not due to an angel, but due to the ebbs and flows of an underground spring.

You can imagine the frustration of the poor man. As an invalid, he has limited mobility. As he explains to Jesus, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me" (Jn 5.7). Without any help, how was he to get into the water when it started to be stirred up? Those more able-bodied or those with someone to help them have the advantage and are able to get into the water before he can. Dashing, yet again, his hopes that this would be the day he would be healed. During the 38 years of his illness, the man undoubtedly got discouraged as others got in the way, got into the healing waters before he did. Each passing day must have been agony. After 38 years, he probably was pretty close to giving up hope that he would ever receive the healing he longs for—that he so desperately wants and needs.

And then along comes Jesus and asks the invalid, "Do you want to be made well?" (Jn 5.6). Of course he wanted to be made well! He had the desire, no doubt about it. Otherwise, why would he have hung out at the Pool of Beth-zatha decade in and decade out? But what he needs to help achieve his goal, his heart's desire, is someone to help him make those final steps to get

into the Pool that promise him healing. But Jesus does him one better. Instead of picking him up and carrying him into the Pool, instead of blocking others so they could not get to the Pool before the invalid, Jesus initiates healing right then and there. Not by any overt action. Instead, Jesus merely tells the man, “stand up, take your mat and walk” (Jn 5.8). With these words, Jesus invites the invalid to participate in his own healing.

In a final thought on this event, John notes that this all happened on a Sabbath. Now, we know from other Gospel accounts that Jesus did heal on the Sabbath. Actions that really ticked off the religious authorities. Because no work was supposed to be done on the Sabbath. And apparently, healing was considered “work” according to Jewish law. And in the case of the invalid, there is a double whammy. He picks up his mat and carries it. Another instance of “work.”

But the real significance of Jesus performing a healing on the Sabbath was that it made a profound statement. As the Son of God, Jesus healing the invalid demonstrates that God’s transformative and healing power is at work. Even on the Sabbath. In fact, if anything, healing on the Sabbath reveals a deeper meaning for the Sabbath as a time of healing. As a time of renewal. As a time of seeking and finding wholeness.

The fact that we have this particular Gospel reading during the Easter season is also telling. During Eastertide we focus first on stories of Jesus’ Resurrection and then move into accounts that reveal something about what the Resurrection means for us as the Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, we are assured during this season—and every season, for that matter—that we share in Christ’s death and Resurrection. That we die to our old self and are born to new life through Him. Our Gospel reading of the healing of the invalid further emphasizes this point. Pointing to the fact that healing is a form of resurrection. And that resurrection is a form of healing. That just as resurrection is about moving from an old way of being to a new way of being, so too is healing a rising from an old way of being to—or at least toward—a new way of being. In healing, we put our old way of being behind us and seek to live a new life. The life of wholeness that God desires for each of us.

Our Gospel reading for today is significant in another way, as well. I couldn’t have planned it better if I tried. But today, in just a few minutes, we will commission nine of our own to serve as Stephen Ministers. Stephen Ministers are lay persons who have undergone specialized training to provide on-going pastoral care to those who are in need of long-term care to help them deal with significant issues in their lives. Those who may be battling a long-term illness or caring for a family member with long-term illness. Those who may be experiencing grief at the loss of a loved one. Those who may have suffered a significant loss, such as the end of a relationship or a job. Those who may be going through a particularly difficult period. Those who are facing a life transition. Those who are a victim of a disaster or accident. Those who are experiencing a spiritual crisis. Anyone who is in need of healing and wholeness, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual.

The fundamental premise of the Stephen Ministry program is that many people who are in the throes of a significant event or circumstance such as illness or grief or dealing with a loss are unable to move forward or have difficulty moving forward on their own. Like the invalid in

today's Gospel, they need someone to help them make the journey that leads to healing and wholeness. The Stephen Minister, referred to as the care-giver, is one who walks alongside the one in need, referred to as the care receiver. Being a guide and companion during the difficult journey. Being a safe place for the care receiver to express his or her fears, doubts, concerns, and struggles. And a place to express their hopes for a better future. The care-giver is one who offers support during the journey to health and wholeness. One who offers a shoulder to cry on. One who offers encouragement. One who helps break down any barriers that may separate the care receiver from God. One who offers a vision of what health and wholeness can look like. Throughout such a journey, the Stephen Ministry program is quite clear about what can and does happen. The Stephen Minister is merely the care-giver. God is the cure giver. God is the one who ultimately provides the healing and wholeness.

While the Stephen Minister is not the one who provides the healing, he or she does serve in some of the same capacities that Jesus did for the invalid. Offering to help: "Do you wish to be made well?" Inviting, encouraging, the care receiver to participate in the healing process. And offering the support and encouragement that is needed so that the care receiver will one day be able to stand up and walk into a new and better future filled with health and wholeness.