

Sermon for May 26, 2019, Easter 6  
Ps. 67; John 5:1-13

*Use these words to draw us closer to you in prayer, O Lord.*

### Good Things Happen, Too

Let me share with you some of the headline news from these past few days:

Severe weather and tornadoes continue to plague the Midwest.  
The disaster aid bill is blocked because Congress can't function.  
Democrats and the President are at a stalemate.  
1500 of our soldiers are being deployed near Iran as tensions rise.  
China and the US are embroiled in a trade war.  
England and a Brexit plan are still unstable.  
And, closer to home, the State of Alabama remains in the negative limelight.

Add to this sampling of news our own personal troubles, concerns, and challenges and it's enough to make us want to pull the covers over our heads, stay in our beds, and say, "Wake me when it's all over." Or, at least stay on our mats, like the sick man in today's gospel.

If you know something about the Gospel of John, then you know it is different from the other three synoptic (similar) gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke focus on Jesus' actions. John focuses more on Jesus' theology. It's important to keep that fact in mind when reading John because there is always an underlying, theological message in his text.

On the surface, today's gospel is about a sick man. We don't know his diagnosis—whether he is lame, blind, or paralyzed—because that's not important to John. What is important is that this unnamed man has been stuck on his mat for 38 years. 38 years—a lifetime—and **nothing has changed**. The man is within sight of a miraculous pool of living and healing water, stirred by an angel, but for whatever reasons in 38 years he has been unable to get close enough to the water to touch it. 38 years. That seems to be pretty bad news for this fellow.

Then along comes Jesus who notices, as Jesus often does, this man and who reaches out to him in compassion: Do you want to be healed? The man does not say yes, or no, but recites a string of excuses as to why, after 38 years, he is still stuck on his mat and no closer to the living water. Jesus heals him anyway—an example of pure grace since the man has done nothing to earn it--and tells him to take up his mat and walk, which he does, right to the authorities to blame Jesus, with no thank you and no gratitude. The Jewish authorities now have another reason to hunt down Jesus; he healed on the Sabbath. Bad news all around. We might think Jesus is the one who would want to hide

in bed with the covers over his head. But that's not the way of Jesus nor the way of a disciple.

With Pentecost two weeks away and our emphasis on 40 Days of Prayer here at St. Andrew, let's look below the surface of this episode and see what we can learn about prayer. But it will take some honesty on our part because we often choose to remain stuck where we are in our own spiritual lives. We go to church and serve on a committee and believe that's enough. But 38 years later, are we really any closer to God?

In my 17 years of ministry, I've taught about prayer, preached about prayer, and led prayer groups and retreats. Here are some of the remarks I've heard in response to an invitation to pray:

I don't know how to pray. No one ever taught me.

I don't have time to pray.

Prayer doesn't work. I asked for my sister to be healed, and she died.

God doesn't answer prayers because he already knows what is going to happen.

Prayer is boring. I can't get into it.

I know I am supposed to pray, but I don't, and then I feel guilty.

God doesn't want to hear about my needs when everyone else's are so much more important.

I'm not good enough to pray.

Prayer is just one more thing to do.

I have to admit that in the seasons of my own spiritual journey, I've used a couple of those excuses myself. Perhaps the problem comes from a misunderstanding of what prayer is which is understandable since, when I googled "How to Pray," I got 1,160,000,000 hits. Where to begin? Why begin? What I can share with you about prayer are these three truths: 1) Prayer is simply saying yes to God's invitation to be in a relationship; 2) There is no right or wrong way to pray; and 3) Disciples are people who pray because disciples model what Jesus did, and Jesus prayed.

While prayer may not be a familiar or comfortable practice for some of us, prayer is something that Jesus Christ not only modeled for us but expected of us. When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, he did not begin his instructions with, "If you pray, pray like this." Instead, he said, "**When** you pray, pray like this."

Yes, bad things do happen even when we pray and will happen as long as we live in this broken world. Reality is hard, it's messy, it often takes us unawares, and it also happens to be precisely where we live. And yes, it is easy to get focused on all the bad things happening around us, to become a tunnel-vision community that can't see beyond the gray, to throw up our hands and say, "What's the use," and stay on our mats. But that's not the way of the disciple.

Instead, we know that good things happen too, that the light does shine in the darkness, and that God's blessings are all around us. The point of this worldly path is to be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, a light-bearer, right in the middle of it all—the good, the bad, and the ugly. And the way to keep our vision clear and in balance is to model Jesus, who showed us the importance of living a life of prayer.

The man in this story had two options. When Jesus asked if he wanted to be healed, Jesus was also asking the man if he wanted to be in a relationship with Jesus. That is what prayer is—being in relationship with our Lord. The man came up with a list of excuses, like we often do in regard to prayer. I suspect he had no desire to be healed because to be healed would require change. There had to be some benefit from lying on the mat for 38 years. Someone was feeding him. Someone was tending to him. Sometimes it's easier to embrace what is less-than than it is to make the required changes to experience something better. And prayer requires a change. It requires intention and our desire.

The second option that man had was, if being healed was really that important, to work harder at getting to that pool. The pool, as water always does in the gospels, symbolizes spiritual life. The pool is where healing and rebirth and transformation happen. The pool is where the angel of God gives life. The pool is prayer. Even after the man is healed, he does not walk toward the pool, or toward Christ. He says no to relationship with Jesus and goes away, completely ungrateful for the gift of physically healing he has received and blind, lame, and paralyzed to his need for spiritual healing. After 38 years, he is still unchanged.

We, too, risk becoming blind, lame, and paralyzed if we don't connect with the One who gives life: God. During Jesus' time on earth, he, too, was in the midst of bad things happening. His nation was under occupation by foreigners; sickness was everywhere; people who were different lived on society's margins; radicals and rebels were ready for war. As a healer and teacher, Jesus was under the gun of the Jewish leadership, and his cousin and friend, John the Baptist, was beheaded for pointing the way toward Jesus. What was Jesus' response to the bad news of John's death? Scripture says that "When he heard this news, he withdrew by boat to a solitary place" Matt. 14:13.

Why? To pray. It was only after that period of prayer, readjusting his vision, that he could resume doing the good things—healing, teaching, loving—that God had prepared for him to do, and that God invites us to do.

In the midst of bad things happening in our world, and perhaps in your own life, what is your response? Do you go off and seek a solitary place to be with God? We are all going to bury our heads in the sand, or live in anxious worry, or stay stuck on our mats if we don't go to the One who created us, loves us, blesses us, and desires our joy. Prayer

is the place we go, the action we take, to remember who we are: much loved children of a loving God.

Our spiritual ancestors asked a key question: “What is man’s chief end?” Or, “What is the most important thing in life?” They wanted people to identify their ultimate goal for living. So, in wisdom, they provided a simple but profound answer: “To glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (from the Westminster Shorter Catechism). Glorifying God means showing honor to God above all other things in our lives. It means putting God first, loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength “because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). “Forever time” with God can begin right now as we cultivate and enrich our relationship with him. Despite the long list of negative remarks about prayer, prayer actually is one way we enjoy God.

In these last two weeks before Pentecost, I believe God is inviting each one of us into some private time with him. Our world is in bad shape and it needs us. Karl Barth, the great Reformed theologian from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said he prayed with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. If we don’t pray for the world, for our country, for this church, for those we love, who will? Pray as you can, not as you can’t. Talk a walk. Work in your yard. Tend to your flowers. Pick up a devotional or your Bible. Sit outside with a cup of coffee and delight in nature. Just be quiet with the Lord and let God love you and offer your prayers in return. And the good news is that while Jesus doesn’t promise to make anything easy, he does promise to be our faithful companion along the way. That is the good thing that happens despite everything else when we make time for prayer.

Thanks be to God.