

“He couldn’t walk without Jesus”

John 5:1-13

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There was a man who could not walk. We meet him in John chapter 5. The man who could not walk spent his days by a pool in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate, which John tells us was called Bethesda. The pool was surrounded by five covered colonnades. A great number of disabled people were at that pool. Something about the pool attracted the people who were disabled. Somehow if you could get into the pool at the just the right time, you could get healed. Or so the story goes. All we know is that there was a man who could not walk. And no matter how long he had been at that pool, and no matter how hard he had tried to be the first person to get into the pool, to be the person who got into the pool at just the right time, nothing had worked. This man simply could not walk. And he had been that way for 38 years.

There was a man who could not walk. Then Jesus came to the pool. Jesus saw the man lying there and learned that the man had been in that condition for a long time. Jesus asked the man who could not walk if he wanted to get well. We assume Jesus meant did the man want to walk. To us, knowing who Jesus is and knowing what Jesus can do, that is not an idle nor rhetorical question. When you know who Jesus is, and when Jesus asks, “Do you want to get well?”, you literally leap at the opportunity. But this man who could not walk did not know who Jesus was. This man who could not walk did not know what Jesus could do. So instead of leaping at the opportunity, the man recounted a sad story he must have told countless times before about how he didn’t have anybody to help him in the water, and when the water was stirred, which somehow was the signal that the healing waters were active, while he was dragging himself down to the water, someone else would cut in and beat him to the waters. In other words, when Jesus asked the man if he wanted to get well, the man said in so many words that he could not walk, and he had no hope that he could ever walk.

But even though the man does not know who Jesus is or what Jesus can do, that does not change the fact that Jesus is with the man. For 38 years, the man could not walk. For 38 years Jesus was not there with the man. Now Jesus is there. Now Jesus is with the man. Jesus tells the man, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” John tells us at once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. Now we realize the man could not walk without Jesus, but with Jesus, the man could walk. The man could walk with Jesus.

And then the story takes a disappointing turn. The man could not walk without Jesus. Then, amazingly, miraculously, the man could walk with Jesus. And then the next thing you know, the man walks without Jesus. When the man who could not walk without Jesus begins to walk without Jesus, you can almost hear John whispering to his readers, “We’re not in Cana anymore.” You see, instead of this dramatic miracle bringing people to Jesus like what happened when water was turned to wine, like when the disciples realized what Jesus meant when he said that if his temple was destroyed it would be raised in three days, like when the woman at the well, and the disciples, and so many people from her town proclaimed about Jesus, “This man is the Savior of the world”, and like when the royal official found out his son was healed at the exact moment Jesus said he was healed and the royal official and his whole family came to Jesus, when this man who could not walk without Jesus begins to walk without Jesus, we see that this miracle, this sign, did not cause the man to come to Jesus, and this miracle, this sign, did not cause the Jewish leaders to come to Jesus. No, instead of coming to Jesus, this miracle, this sign, leads the Jewish leaders to begin persecuting Jesus.

We who have come to Jesus read this story about the man who could not walk...without Jesus...becoming able to walk with Jesus, and we see this story as one of the signs that point to Jesus as being God’s anointed one, the Messiah. When the man who could not walk without Jesus becomes able to walk with Jesus, we can almost hear Jesus preaching in his hometown synagogue, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s

favor.” (Luke 4:18,19) When the man who could not walk without Jesus becomes able to walk with Jesus, we can almost hear Jesus giving this report of the ministry he has done. “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (Matthew 11:5,6) If you have come to Jesus, that’s how you look at this miracle in John 5. But in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus finishes that inspiring summary of what he has been doing by saying, “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” Well, in this story, where a man who could not walk without Jesus becomes able to walk with Jesus, well, unfortunately, there is a whole lot of stumbling that happens in the aftermath of this sign, in the aftermath of this miracle.

On first glance the stumbling takes place because of the Sabbath. It is not until after Jesus has set the man free from his suffering and commanded him to take up his mat and walk that John gives us a detail that turns out to be extremely important. After the man has picked up his mat and walked, John tells us, “The day on which this took place was a Sabbath.” That one detail becomes a huge stumbling block for the Jewish leaders. That one detail, that the man who could now walk was carrying his mat on the Sabbath, an activity which was not allowed on the sabbath, that one detail overshadows all the other events that took place that day, for the Jewish leaders. The Jewish leaders, the religious leaders do not celebrate that a miracle has occurred, the miracle of a man who could not walk for 38 years walking. All the religious leaders could see was that the man was carrying his mat, on the Sabbath. We might expect a spirited debate. What is more important? Keeping the sabbath rule about carrying a mat or the amazing and miraculous fact that a man who could not walk for 38 years is walking? But such a debate does not occur here in John chapter 5.

Instead, Jesus places another stumbling block before the religious leaders. Jesus defends himself and his actions by saying, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” If you thought the fact that the man carrying his mat on the Sabbath was a stumbling block, just watch what happens when Jesus says his words about his Father always working and that Jesus is joining right in with

that work. Jesus says, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” John tells us, “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” Friends, that is the stumbling block that Jesus presents. It is not a debate about what is more important, keeping every jot and tittle of the Sabbath law or doing good and helping a man who could not walk become able to walk. You could have a great debate about that type of thing. But what Jesus sets before us, spelled out so clearly in the Gospel of John, is that he and the Father are one.

If Jesus and the Father are one, if John’s words about the Word who was with God in the beginning and who was God and who became flesh and dwelt among us, if Jesus is “I am” in the same way that the eternal God of the universe is “I am”, then the story about the man who could not walk becomes a compelling critique of the relationship between God and human beings. If God and Jesus are one, if the Word of God who became flesh, revealed as Jesus Christ, was with God in the beginning, then the story of Israel becomes not just a precursor to the Christ, but the story of Israel becomes part and parcel of this grand narrative about the God who loves the world so much that he sends his one and only Son into the world to save the world.

Today we have before us a story of a man who could not walk without Jesus. Let us use this story of a man who could not walk to explore the events of the Exodus, that defining story of the people of God, the people of Israel.

Israel could not walk. A cruel Pharaoh rose to power who oppressed the people of Israel, the people of God. That cruel Pharaoh worked the people ruthlessly. He made their lives bitter. He demanded their boy children be put to death. The Israelites groaned in their slavery. They cried out to God for help. Israel was stuck in slavery. Israel could not walk.

Israel could not walk. And then God came to a burning bush, where he grabbed the attention of a man named Moses. There in that stretch of the Midian desert, speaking through flames that were like tongues of fire, God said to Moses, “I have seen the misery of my

people. I have heard them crying out. I am concerned. I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..." (Exodus 3:7,8) The events of Exodus clearly show us that Israel could not walk...without God. But with God, Israel could walk. With God Israel walked through the waters of the Red Sea. With God Israel walked up to Mount Sinai and received the words of God that would shape, strengthen, guide, and govern their lives. With God Israel walked across the desert sands, right up to the banks of the Jordan River. The waters of the Jordan ceased to flow, and with God the Israelites walked across that Jordan River and entered the Promised Land, that land flowing with milk and honey. With God Israel walked to the walls of that fortified city known as Jericho and with a shout those walls crumbled to the ground. Israel could not walk without God. But with God, Israel walked. What a testimony to the power of God.

And then the unthinkable happened. God delivered Israel from slavery. God delivered Israel to the Promised Land. Israel could not walk without God. With God, Israel walked. And then for reasons that defy our imagination, Israel did the unthinkable. Israel walked without God. Israel walked without God, and it was an unmitigated disaster. Israel turned away from the commandments of God. Israel turned to other gods. Israel worshiped idols. Israel did not practice justice. Israel neglected the needs of the widows, the orphans, the strangers, and the aliens. Israel practiced an external righteousness that looked good on the outside, but God knew it was rotten to the core. Israel walked without God.

Now God comes to his people again. God comes in a new way. This new way is not unrelated to the God who revealed himself in the Old Testament. This new way is intimately related to the God who revealed himself in the Old Testament. The new way God comes is as the Word of God who was with God in the beginning and who is very God himself. Some people don't know who this Word of God is. The man who could not walk without Jesus, and who was able to walk with Jesus, and who ended up walking without Jesus, I guess you could say in his defense, he did not know who Jesus was. When the religious leaders

ask him who healed him John tells us the man had no idea who it was. Even though Jesus healed him, the man had no idea who Jesus was. The religious leaders know who Jesus is, but the Jesus they know is not the Jesus we know. They know Jesus as a Sabbath breaker. They know Jesus as the blasphemer who thinks he is equal to God. But they do not know, they do not believe, that Jesus is equal to God. In fact, when Jesus makes himself equal to God, that gives them even more reason to want to put him to death. Some people don't know who Jesus is.

Some people do not know who Jesus is. But some people do know who Jesus is. Some people do know who Jesus is. John wrote the words of this gospel so that people would know who Jesus is. After Jesus has suffered and died and risen again from the dead, John writes about the purpose of his gospel, "These words are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31)

Who are we? When you get right down to it, the church is made up of people who can not walk. The church is made up of people who can not walk...without Jesus. But with Jesus...we can walk. The church is made up of people who walk with Jesus. Instead of growing out of that, or leaving that behind, forgetting it, forsaking it, instead of coming to a point where we become that unthinkable thing...a people who walk without Jesus... the church is a group of people who always walk with Jesus, who abide with Jesus, who drink of his living water, who eat of his living bread, who cling to Jesus as our Good Shepherd, who trust with complete faith that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, who embrace the reality that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, a people whose lives are filled and blessed and guided by the Holy Spirit. The church is made up of people who can not walk without Jesus. The church is made up of people who have found the healing and salvation that is in Jesus. The church is made up of people who now and forever walk with Jesus.

