

Gospel of John: Close Encounters of the First Kind

Session #4: Jesus encounters the disabled man at the pool of Bethesda

Thursday, December 4, 2008

After the Prologue of John, we probed

- the first half of chapter 3: the encounter with Nicodemus, *then*
- the first half of chapter 4: the encounter with the Samaritan woman

Let us now probe the first half of chapter 5: an encounter with an infirm gentleman,

a disabled fellow at the pool called Bethesda.

This encounter is the third in this series of three encounters with “outcasts”.

Jesus the Bridegroom is in a hurry.

Jesus the Bridegroom, in the haste of love,

proactively engages persons outside the Chosen People:

- *the Samaritan woman*
who represents humanity in its brokenness and bitterness of heart
- *the royal officer and his dying son*
who represent humanity in its suffering children and its helpless parents
- *the infirm at the pool of Bethesda*
who represents humanity in its isolation of illness
and the consequent inability to lead an autonomous and productive life.

Let us initially read verses 1-16.

If we have time after our exploration, we will continue beyond verse 16.

I first want to explore the encounter *per se*.

Moreover, in verses 19 and following, Jesus reveals another aspect of who he is: the Son. In addition to the Lamb, the Bridegroom, Jesus is the *Son*.

After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep (Gate) a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes.

In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?"

The sick man answered him,

"Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred; while I am on my way, someone else gets there before me."

Jesus said to him, "Rise, take your mat, and walk."

Immediately the man became well, took his mat, and walked.

Now that day was a Sabbath.

So the Jews said to the man who was cured,

"It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat."

He answered them, "The man who made me well told me,

'Take your mat and walk.'"

They asked him, "Who is the man who told you,

'Take it and walk'?"

The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there.

After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him,

"Look, you are well; do not sin any more,

so that nothing worse may happen to you."

The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well.

Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a Sabbath.

Jesus follows Jewish custom and, on the feast of either Pentecost or Passover (which one is uncertain), Jesus goes to Jerusalem.

Regardless, John sets the stage: a great celebration of thanksgiving, to be contrasted with the dire scene at the pool of Bethesda—*not* a great celebration.

The term “Bethesda” supposedly suggests “break” or “brokenness”.

This pool has been rediscovered—archaeologists say—close to the location of the Temple.

Very little is known about it.

It was not connected to the Temple.

It is surmised that it was, in fact, a pagan place that survived because it did have mysterious healing qualities.

What is certain is that it is a gathering place for the disabled.

And so, it is not exactly a spa!

There are no massages, no aromatherapy, no fluffy towels.

There is a whole lot of desperation.

This is, as the gentleman himself describes it, a free-for-all.

This pool, for some mysterious reason, has healing qualities.

When there is turbulence, when it is “stirred”,

those who descend into its waters are healed.

Later manuscripts have added a verse

about an angel descending into the pool to stir the water.

Whatever the case may be, the healing that occurs

—albeit outside of a Jewish setting—is linked to the divine.

So, this fellow is in a very depressing community.

Let's just name it.

We are not being mean in saying: a depressing community.

And whenever you find your community—whichever one: family, work, Parish - unpleasant, think of this community!

His community is not depressing so much because of the array of handicaps that are on display day in and day out

—although these are surely challenging to human sensibility—
but because of the desperation found therein.

If it were a support group, that would be one thing.

But what these people have in common, the common good of this community, in a sense, is the desire to get the heck out of there.

That is depressing.

If there were some concern for neighbor,
this fellow would not have been there for 38 years.

Verse 5 “**One man was there who had been ill for 38 years.**”

Can you imagine lying there for 38 years?

I can not imagine lying there for 38 seconds!

Verse 6 “**When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him ‘Do you want to be well?’**”

Jesus gravitates towards him.

Jesus cannot help but take notice of him.

Now, the question that Jesus poses seems somewhat stupid, “Do you want to get well?”

“Uh, no, I actually kind of like it here. I would not want to get well and have to leave.” What do you expect the fellow to respond?

What sort of question is this?!?

Jesus actually does something analogous to what he did
with the Samaritan woman.

He seeks to awaken desire, for desire opens the heart.

Like the Samaritan woman, this fellow is so crushed by burden
that he barely desires anything.

He too is numb.

Think of how easily it happens to us.

We can have been hurt one too many times, or be so exhausted by infirmity,
that is, overwhelmed by circumstance, that we can barely desire
anything, that we can be numb.

Jesus wants to open this fellow’s heart.

The disabled man’s answer testifies to his numbness
and to the consequent self-absorption.

He does not answer the question.

One might have expected a resounding

“Absolutely! Thank you!” or “Where have you been all my life?”

Verse 7: **“The sick man answered him ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred; while I am on my way someone else gets there before me.’”**

Just say “Yes!” He is only able to lament his lot.

Now, his lamentation is understandable.

Again, I can not even imagine the madness of this scenario.

In verse 3, John specifies that at the pool *“lay a large number.”*

And when the water is stirred, it is each man and woman for him or herself, rushing to the pool, knocking each other over, crawling over each other.

Thirty eight years of trying, of being ignored, of being trampled:

I would not be a happy camper. I would be bitter. I would lament!

Verse 7 (continued): **“Jesus said to him ‘Rise, take your mat, and walk’”**.

Once again we witness the Bridegroom at work.

Once again we witness the haste of love.

What does Jesus *not* do? Waste time. “Rise!” He says.

Jesus reaches into this man’s isolation, into the heart of this man’s bitterness.

This fellow is unable to cooperate.

And the beautiful, encouraging thing is that Jesus does not await his cooperation.

Jesus’ is a purely *gratuitous* act of love.

Indeed, love is gratuitous.

Verse 8: **“Jesus said to him ‘Rise, take your mat and walk.’”**

Again, the love is gratuitous.

There is nothing in this for Jesus.

He simply loves, and reveals to us what it is to love.

How wonderful to see and know that when we are overwhelmed by
circumstance

—both inner and outer—Jesus hurries to love us,
and to meet us in the heart of our struggle and inability.

That is good news!

St. Bernard (born in Dijon in 1090—yes, where they make the mustard!)

in his commentary on the Song of Songs, says

“Love is sufficient of itself.

It gives pleasure by itself and because of itself.

It is its own merit, its own reward.

Love looks for no cause outside itself, no effect beyond itself.

Its profit lies in its practice.

I love because I love.

I love that I may love.”

This is sometimes difficult for us in our society where the question

“What’s in it for me?” often haunts us.

This is sometimes difficult for us quite simply because in human love
we await some response.

There needs to be reciprocity in human love if the relationship is to blossom.

St. Bernard is speaking of divine love,

the divine love with which we have been gifted, the love of Christ’s heart.

This love is purely gratuitous.

And so, when we struggle in relationships, by the way,

we must trust and call upon this deeper love
which enables us to extend ourselves with no expectations of a response.
Jesus love absolutely, gratuitously, and unconditionally.
Jesus simply loves this fellow and heals him.
And in so doing—because he is absolutely overwhelmed by circumstance—
sets him free to *love*, which we see in his obedience.
Love for God always implies a certain obedience,
because God is greater than us.

Verse 9: “**Immediately the man became well, took his mat and walked.**”

As Jesus speaks, the man is healed – in his body and in his heart.
Jesus rehabilitates this fellows heart as well.
What is the sign of this?
The man obeys Jesus’ order.
Once again, our love for God is first and superior,
implies a certain obedience.
This fellow’s first act, once healed, is to do what Jesus says.
He is no longer entirely self reverential.
Although he does not fully grasp who Jesus is, Jesus becomes his reference.
He begins to love Jesus.
And Jesus then sends him on his way—surprisingly with no instructions.

Verse 9 (continued) “**Now that day was a Sabbath.**”

Jesus knew it was the Sabbath.

Jesus knew that there is no better way to keep the Sabbath than to communicate the mercy of God.

The group of Jews who approach this fellow now healed keep the Sabbath in purely legalistic fashion.

Without passing judgment: we see similar things nowadays in the Church.

They make me think of what some of my relatives say when asked why they do not go to church.

“Have you seen all those people, ‘faithful church goers; after Mass they run to their cars, do not say hello to one another, compete to vacate the premises first, get upset if they are not first, and perhaps even cheat on their taxes.”

One does wonder what runs through the heads of some:

“I fulfilled my legal obligation.”

Why *does* Jesus heal on the Sabbath?

For the fun of provocation?

To prove the point of his superiority over the Jews?

Jesus does express his “superiority” but such is probably not his point.

In all the Jesus does, Jesus consecrates and sanctifies.

In other words, Jesus brings the presence of God, because he is the presence of God, because he is God.

And that which has, in the Jewish world, already been consecrated, is further consecrated by Jesus.

Notice that this healing gesture occurs just before, and is the occasion for, a great discourse on the Son, the Son one with the Father.

Jesus performs the gesture on the day of the Sabbath

And, in so doing, does several things.

The Sabbath marks time.

The Sabbath is the holy marker in the flow of time.

Jesus, the God-Man, takes hold of it and in so doing, consecrates time—this fundamental mysterious flow of our world that so conditions us.

When we think about it, we realize that time and place are the two things that condition us most fundamentally.

They need to be consecrated, taken hold of by God.

In the Jewish world:

- time is consecrated by the Sabbath.
- place is consecrated by the Temple.

Jesus takes hold of both.

Both, interestingly, are for the sake of adoring God, of adoration.

And both mysteriously find their completion in Christ, more specifically, Christ's glorified body,

whereby and wherein we adore God in the most intimate way imaginable.

By Christ's humanity—which is linked to our humanity, we enter into the greatest intimacy with God.

And so, time and place

are the two fundamental aspects of the physical world, *or rather*

are the two fundamental experiences we have of the physical world.

The physical world is brought to completion

in that most perfect creation of the physical world: the body of Jesus.

But I digress, and I open a huge can of worms

—good worms but many worms, which have me in over my head!

Let us resume our reading.

Verse 10 **“So the Jews said to the man who was cured
‘It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.’”**

The poor fellow has barely collected himself
—after 38 years of hell there is some collecting to do!
—when he was accosted by the so called religious experts.

These “experts”, in the process, reveal that they do not understand
or believe that love is the fulfillment of the law, the law which is relative to
man.

How heart-breaking that they not share in his joy.

Their accusation is truly ridiculous compared to the good that has happened:
“the man became well, took his mat and walked”

vs.

“it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.”

How truly silly in the light of the mercy that was communicated by Jesus.

Verse 11: **“He answered them ‘the man who made me well told me,
‘Take your mat and walk’”**

The response of this fellow reveals
how impoverished he was by his experience, how damaged
after 38 years without human warmth and without intelligent interaction.
If the Jews had been perceptive and sensitive,
they would have seen that this fellow is very fragile,

and might have been merciful.

But it is not about mercy. It is about the *law*.

If this fellow had encountered a group of Jews after fully collecting himself he might have responded

“Listen, I could care less about your legalism.

You have no idea what I have lived for 38 years.

The gift of my healing and freedom so outweighs your rules.

Here, take the mat, carry it.....or perhaps drop it.”

He is too fragile to express himself in this way.

And he is too fragile to take responsibility for his act.

He simply points to Jesus—whom he does not know

(there was not a whole lot of news communication at the pool of Bethesda).

And so, how amazing:

Jesus’ gesture was truly a purely gratuitous gesture, a gesture of mercy.

Verse 12:

“They asked him ‘Who is the man who told you ‘Take it and walk?’”

The Jews stubbornly persist.

It should have been obvious that he did not know,

that this fellow was in the midst of some major regrouping as was,

at this point, probably happy just to know his own name.

It is striking to see how legalism can suffocate mercy.

Verse 13 **“The man who was healed did not know who it was for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there.”**

It is underscored that there was little verbal exchange between Jesus and this man.

He did not know who Jesus was because, again, such news did not reach the pool of Bethesda and because Jesus slipped away.

Jesus had not told him.

Jesus seems somewhat sneaky. There is a lot of slipping away!

Jesus sometimes likes crowds and sometimes does not like crowds—or so it seems.

In reality, is not a question of mood, like us:

when we sometimes feel like going to the party, sometimes not.

It is a question of purpose.

Jesus chooses his audience and his setting based on his purpose.

Here Jesus clearly wanted to communicate love gratuitously to this one person:

a personal encounter with no commentary and no audience.

Verse 14: **“After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him ‘Look, you are well. Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you.’”**

We have a second encounter with Jesus and this man.

Interestingly, this fellow has made his way to the temple.

He has been freed in his heart to worship.

That is, in fact, the ultimate freedom.

The first encounter with Jesus set this man free in his heart.

The second encounter with Jesus educated this man in his heart.

“Do not sin that nothing worse may happen to you.”

This fellow might have thought to himself for a moment,

“Uh, I’m having a hard time thinking of anything worse.”

What exactly is Jesus saying?

Is Jesus suggesting that his infirmity is due to sin?

And that this time he was actually lucky?

In other words, that even greater sin can lead to greater infirmity?

As we know from Jesus’ statements regarding the man born blind (John 9),
there is no necessary connection

between personal, that is, *actual* sin and infirmity.

What Jesus is suggesting is that sin is worse than infirmity.

In other words, infirmity of the heart is worse than infirmity of the body.

To sin is not to love, which renders the heart infirm.

Jesus is revealing something to this fellow, enlightening this fellow,
not *blaming* this fellow.

Verse 15: **“The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well.”**

Conversion takes time. Healing of the heart can take time.

This fellow has yet to become fully aware of who Jesus is

And has not yet taken full ownership of his situation.

He just points to Jesus.

Verse 16 **“Therefore the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on the Sabbath”.**

As we know the Jews were seeking
as many reasons as possible to persecute Jesus.

This so-called “disrespect” of the Sabbath was one of them.

But, of course, we must make the distinction
between “excuse” and “reason”.

It’s a very helpful distinction on our own personal lives!

The legalism of these Jews blinded them to the purpose of the Sabbath:
inner freedom linked to adoration.

Let us move on to Verse 17.

“Jesus answered them

‘My father is at work until now, so I am at work.’” (so there!)

Jesus does not seek to justify his work on the Sabbath.

Rather, he goes for all-out revelation.

We recall that revelation is always *merciful*.

Although Jesus may seem to be antagonistic, or at least challenging,
he is being merciful with these Jews whom he loves.

Jesus reveals his divinity,

or at least an intimacy with God that no one else dares claim.

And Jesus, in so doing, reveals a certain lordship over the Sabbath.

This was far too jarring to these Jews.

What was also very jarring, certainly, to these Jews
is that Jesus says that God is at *work*.

What is jarring in that?

Well, the Sabbath is considered to be the day that God *rested* from Creation.

And here Jesus is claiming that God is “at work until now”.

We must know that God “resting” is a *metaphor*.

God does not rest, God does not have a body.

This rest is a metaphor for what?

For God’s contemplation of his creation

Or, rather, how creation occurs within God’s contemplation.

God contemplates himself and it is not naval gazing.

If this is true, then the Sabbath (or the Lord’s Day for us),

is to be primarily and most deeply when we seek

- to contemplate God
- to enter into God’s contemplation.