

## Sermon on the Lame of the Pool Bethesda

Sunday, 21. October 2007 by Kurt J. Schmidt

*Some time later Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades.*

*Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralysed.*

*One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him,*

*“Do you want to get well?” – “Sir”, the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”*

*The Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.*

*The day on which this took place was the Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.” – But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk’.”*

*So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?” – The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.*

*Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you.” The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.*

*(John, 5, 1 – 15)*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Dear brothers and sisters,

*Sir Isaac Newton’s “First Law of Motion”* states “Everything continues in a state of rest unless it is compelled to change by forces impressed upon it.” Once and again we all recognize within ourselves the need for change. Yet we also recognize that the change we need is often hard to achieve and may not be originated in our own willing and acting. Maybe we are more often set in motion and are encouraged by “forces impressed upon us”. When we are confronted with the necessity of change although we would rather stay as we are and where we are. Or when being encountered by somebody whom we love and maybe even more effective: who really loves us.

Jesus says to the man – the one who had been there for thirty-eight years - **“Do you want to get well?”** This is a telling question. And of course each of us would answer “Yes, Sir I will!” when we are struck down by a severe illness or by a physical or mental handicap or when we are facing emotionally or socially reduced circumstances. Yes, we want the change! We want to achieve an undamaged life - free and meaningful and hopeful.

How come that this man is that kind of reluctant. It looks like something is preventing him from answering just spontaneously “Yes, I will!”

Now, let’s first get an impression of the situation before we will have a closer look on what occurs to this man. The biblical story tells us that Jesus came to **Jerusalem** because he wanted to join in a religious feast – maybe the feast commemorating the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. Jerusalem - the place where the temple is located and where the presence of God no-where can be experienced better. Here is the place where the tabernacle with the tables of covenant are safe kept. In this city Jesus comes to a place where the hope of healing drew a lot of sick people. It was at a special pool – the pool of **Bethesda**. This Aramaic word *bet* means house and the word *heset* means mercy - **“House of mercy”**.

It is worthy of note that the evangelist or the first Christian writers mentioned that the pool of Bethesda was located close to the **Sheep Gate** - the entrance to the city thru which the sheep for temple sacrifices were brought – reminding the reader of Jesus as the *Lamb of God* who would take away the sins of the world thus renewing the covenant of eternal life – that is: close to the Holy and Almighty God.

The evangelist probably has been aware of the symbolism of this place. At the pool of Bethesda there was a colonnade with five pillars – reminding devoted Jews on the five books of Moses, the Torah, in which one can read of the ways of God. (A few verses later the evangelist lets Jesus say *“You search the*

*Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me.”* In other words: those five columns stood massively for the gift of life found in the Torah the most important first part of the Hebrew Bible.

Now, this poor fellow lay for thirty-eight years under the shadow of these five pillars – and remained ill. Thirty-five years –another symbolism – means lifetime. Forty years Moses walked ahead his people thru the desert – a lifetime. Sometimes we ourselves have to struggle all our life to achieve our goal.

**Water** as a symbol was also important to the story. Water which destroys sin, thus bringing healing and wholeness – wholeness within oneself, in relation to his fellow men and in relation to God. Reminding us that God delivered Noah and his family from the waters and God delivered Israel from the Egyptian bondage by bringing them thru the Red Sea safely.

The water of the Bethesda was supposed to have special healing properties. Get into it at the right time and your illness is gone. There is a legend that an angel would on occasion come and stir up the waters of the pool, and the first one to enter the pool after the **angel** stirred the water would be healed. Not unlike what is still found and many parts of the world. Lourdes in Southern France is such a place. And maybe even places like Bad Kissingen or Baden Baden in Germany are believed to have some kind of healing power to those who are longing for a change in life.

The story tells us that Jesus moved among the lame and the blind and sick people and while doing so he is drawn to **one particular man**. We do not learn more about the nature of his disease other than he was unable to walk. It is known that the disability to stand on ones own feet and walk may not always have physical reasons rather than emotional. I heard of an old lady who all in a sudden was not able to stand up and walk. And how she had loved to take promenades and go shopping. No medical reasons were found and as she was living in a home for elderly people it was discussed among the staff members whether she was a nursing case. However one young nurse who had good personal relation with the old lady had observed that she seemingly was suffering from depression. So the staff decided on treating her depression and after a while she felt better and was able to walk again.

The disabled man probably was not even aware that Jesus saw him lying in his misery unless Jesus encountered him with that one question: **“Do you want to get well?”** It might seem an unnecessary and even ridiculous question. However, it turns out to be crucial for this man – and for us.

Do we really want to get out of those circumstances we have got used to for so many years? Do we really want to risk a totally open and insecure life-situation? Do we really dare to cut ourselves off from partnerships and relations to people who definitely seemed to belong to our social life? Do we really want to take the courage and stretch out towards a better but yet unknown life? The disabled man did not answer Jesus´ question directly but rather said, that he had no one to place him in the pool in the right moment. He complains how unfortunate he is. He sees himself as a victim of a society where nobody takes care of others.

The evangelist tells us a **parable of the human condition**. The paralysed man cannot hope to get any help of his fellowmen who are living under similar conditions. He like all the others has not experienced solidarity – and all of them didn´t get it and they didn´t give it to others.

The other day my colleague who originally comes from Kirgisia, told me that she has been visiting her mother who became ill. A hospital treatment was required. However, the patients there are totally dependent on their relatives, friends or neighbours who are obligated to besides of the medical treatment supply the patient with food and everything he needs.

Without help of others a person cannot stay alive – especially in crisis situations. **“I have no one to help me”** this is sad and it is dangerous. Even today in our rich country there are many thousands, even millions of young and old people who are dependent on help – of the government, of their families and of those who take efforts to integrate them into normal social life. If you get 4 € per day for yourself an your two kids – you may not starve but you and your children are socially dead.

However, Jesus does not seem to really being impressed. This is the common way of life. **But do you want your life to be changed?** *“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.* Impressive! Wonderful! Unbelievable! I would like to shout spontaneously. But now what? Did this poor fellow finally answer the question of Jesus´? No he did not. In fact he did not do a bit. Besides of trusting in what Jesus tells him. That it is really functioning: to stand on our own feet.

To walk our way. To enjoy a new life. This man stood up and walked. This man who first seemed to entirely having lost his hope in a better life trusted in what Jesus told him.

How come? Maybe because Jesus was driving at something that is at the very heart of our problem. Which usually is not just our physical paralysis. This man's and maybe our own problem lay deeper. Maybe it was in spite of all obstacles the right moment to be asked the right question at the right place from the right person: Do you really want to get well?

Psychotherapists know that this is the crucial point in treatment: one has to agree that change is possible. That there is a better way out than death – to quote the Bremer Stadtmusikanten.

It is nothing less than a decision of life or death whether we are listening to **our desire to be whole** – in the sense of united with oneself, with others whom we love and with God who loves us. Do we really want to be filled with God's Spirit, because if we are we will never be the same. Life won't be the same.

**What did this man do?** He still felt his **desire**. He trusted a stranger whom he did not know. In a sense he "automatically" did the right thing in this very moment. He allowed the spirit of mercy and the spirit of change to enter into his life. Just to understand right: it was not a matter of obedience but a matter of **desire and faith**.

Why faith? Not in the sense that this man owned a lot of faith rather than he opened himself for the possibility of hope and new life conditions when being encountered by Jesus. The evangelist introduces us Jesus in the very beginning of his gospel as follows:

*"He was with God in the beginning and thru him all things came to be ...In him was life, and that life was the life of mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never mastered it... To all who did accept him, to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God... The word became flesh: ... and we saw his glory... full of grace and truth" (John 1).*

Now, the man who was healed went to the **temple** his mat tucked under his arm. He could have thrown it away. But for some reason he took the mat with him. And carrying his mat he showed himself to the priests waiting for their final judgement that he apparently became healthy again. No longer beaten by God's punishment for his sins – as this was the common conviction. Now, when being healed he could hope to again becoming a member of the society and a fellow believer.

But what happened? Nobody rejoiced and praised God. Rather than: *"The Jews said to the man who had been healed," It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."*

The law says "No mat carrying on the Sabbath". But, is that really true? No, the law says "You must not do any unnecessary work on the Lord's Day". The point is: not to put emphasis on avoiding things on Sabbath rather than on enjoying the rest and being grateful for having received so many good things in life.

The evangelist ends his story with yet **another surprise**. Jesus finds the healed man in the temple. And once again he encounters him saying to him, *"See, you are well again. Stop sinning, or something worse may happen to you."* The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

I do not think, that Jesus is saying that the reason for this man's paralysis was that he had sinned in some plane moral way. Rather than: the experience of fulfilment of one's life-desire can and does change our life. This awareness may keep us from falling back into the former life-conditions.

I will end sharing with you an situation I have experienced in Ethiopia when we were travelling thru the country. Passing thru a village we suddenly were surrounded by a large crowd of people. Many of them were carrying all kinds of loads. And then I saw this man: laughing and shouting and even singing while he was carrying his wooden bed on his head. Just as if he was the healed one from the Pool of Bethesda.

I will never forget this moment. And sometimes I feel a desire that I were him.  
Amen

*The peace of God which is beyond all understanding guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus . Amen*