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St. John's Episcopal Church  
6 Easter C10 / May 9 / John 5:1-9

A few weeks ago, Rich Lammlin, a member of this church and former warden, represented St. John's at a financial workshop. Seventeen churches of different shapes and sizes had gathered to visit about the practice of stewardship in their respective congregations and to learn about the relationship between mission and money.

To help tell our story, Rich took a copy of the St. John's stewardship booklet; a document that became quite popular with the people around his table. The *story* that the booklet told about where money that is given to God through St. John's goes to ~ and what it does ~ was found to be remarkable to those who perused through its pages. One participant, a treasurer at a financially struggling church, thought that such a booklet would be simply *great* for his own parish. "Of course," he said to Rich in a somewhat sad, resigned sort of tone, "I'll have to write it all by myself."

"What do you mean?" Rich asked. "You're the treasurer: you report the numbers. Ask the other ministry leaders to write about their committee's ministry and share with the congregation what their groups have done, what their groups are currently doing, and where their groups believe that God is calling them to go."

"You don't understand," this treasurer said, still in that sad, resigned sort of tone. "*I dl* be the one who would wind up writing *everything* ~ and putting it all together."

That was a very sad witness to hear from a church leader. That treasurer realizes that his church is struggling; he recognizes the *value* of proclaiming how money given to God through the Church is transformed into mission; and he further recognizes the value of sharing that understanding with the wider congregation. But *this* is the sad part: that treasurer has diagnosed

the financial troubles of his parish as being the *disease* that has to be cured. The *truth* is that his church's financial position is a *symptom*; a *symptom* of a *larger*, more serious disease, that is further complicated by even *more* symptoms. And what are those symptoms? Listen again to his side of the conversation. The leaders of his parish are not willing to share what ministry has been done; they are not willing to share what ministry is currently ongoing; and they are not willing to share the vision of where God is leading them to go. The disease of that congregation is that they have no ownership of their Christian mission. And in order for that disease to be *cured* ~ that is, in order for that congregation to become *healthier* with a truer sense of mission in the community in which God has planted them ~ then that congregation will need to engage in the hard, often time-consuming work, of confronting and changing some of their current behaviors and beliefs about ministry and mission.

The treasurer of that church is not seeing that. Instead, he is putting all of his hope that things will change for his congregation ~ in a *booklet*! In the pages of a *booklet* which he alone will construct. He's putting his hope in a *booklet*. And in my mind, *that* is a small sliver of hope, indeed.

That treasurer could benefit from a visit to the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John. There he would meet the man who has been sitting by a certain pool for thirty-eight years, hoping to be cured by the waters' *miraculous* power. Local legend had it that an angel of the Lord would occasionally come and that the angel would *stir* the waters of this particular pool! And if you were the first person to enter that pool once the angel stirred its waters, you would be *healed*! *Cured*! And so there the man would sit, *waiting* for the angel to come and *agitate* those waters. Yet unfortunately for him, because of his infirmed legs, every time the waters bubbled, someone

else would jump in the pool before him! For *thirty-eight* years, this man could never be first! Every day. For thirty-eight years. That's a long time.

The people of that man's culture were not familiar with the dynamics of a hot spring. They didn't realize that it was the *earth*, and not an *angel*, that was causing the waters to be stirred. And yet ~ it was in that pool that that man had placed his hope. Every day. For thirty-eight years. Living ~ hoping ~ dreaming ~ on a small sliver of hope.

Jesus approaches this man and asks, "Do you want to be made well?" Note that Jesus doesn't ask about the state of the man's *faith*. Faith is not a factor in *this* particular healing story. This man isn't even *grateful*. Once healed, he never says "Thank you". He never praises God nor does he give God glory like others whom Jesus had healed. So this healing story isn't about faith, and it doesn't emphasize gratitude. So what *does* it emphasize? What *is* this story all about?

On the surface, hearing Jesus ask if this man wishes to be healed seems like a stupid question to ask. But Jesus is not *really* asking if the man wants to be healed. He's asking if the man wants to *change*. The deeper question that Jesus is asking is, "Do you really want to change? Do you *really* want to be made well? Do you want to change your beliefs and, instead of placing your faith in a hot spring...can you believe that you can be changed in me?"

True to human form, the man *dodges* Jesus' question. He answers the question by giving excuses; he places the blame on others; he blames his infirmity; but he never answers the question. And that's not surprising. Odd as it sounds, some people don't *want* to be healed. They don't *want* to do the hard work of confronting their behaviors and beliefs; because if they did, they might have to change! Thus as sad as it sounds, and as *ridiculous* as it seems, some people would rather drown in their addictions and in their false hopes than change.

That man spent thirty-eight years sitting beside a pool that he thought contained miraculous water. Other people spend thirty-eight dollars for a bottle of pills that promise to block every gram of fat from going to their hips so that they can keep on eating whatever they want to eat. And then we have that church treasurer at the conference ~ a man who placed all of his hopes for the future of his congregation in the pages of a booklet ~ a *booklet* that he was going to put together himself. People don't want to do the hard work of changing. They *want* the shortcut. They want the *easy* way. They *don't* want to confront their behaviors or their beliefs ~ because they don't want to change.

That treasurer that Rich met saw our booklet and he thought that he had stumbled upon the secret of our "success" however he was envisioning "success" to be. But nothing could be further from the truth. As many of you can readily attest to, the *mission* that our church community has *embraced* has not been the result of a booklet. The booklet, published annually, only tells of one chapter in what has been, and what will continue to be, a long story of mission and ministry. The booklet only provides a snapshot of the here and now. But the "secret" to our "success" is that we are a Christian community, grounded firmly, firmly in Christ, that is not afraid to confront our behaviors and beliefs when necessary. We have been willing to change when change has been needed. We have been willing to slosh through the difficult waters together, confronting the hard questions, and making the hard decisions, whenever those questions arise and whenever those decisions need to be made. It has *not* always been easy ~ but Jesus never said that carrying a cross into the world would ever *be* easy. When one walks with Christ, there are no shortcuts. Thus we seek to follow, and to follow faithfully, wherever he leads us. For we believe ~ and we believe firmly ~ that by following Christ, and Christ alone, we, and the whole world, will ultimately be made well.

What is therefore true for us on a corporate level, can also be true for us on a personal level. Whether as families, as couples, or as individuals, this Gospel story asks a very important, life-confronting question. What pools are we currently sitting by? That is, what slivers of hope are we currently trying to balance our lives on because we are afraid or not willing to ask for Jesus' help? What beliefs or behaviors are we hiding, or attempting to slide through life on, because we don't want to confront them? What areas of our lives have we simply accepted ~ because we are too overwhelmed by the idea of how much *work* it will take to change?

These are not hopeless questions. If anything, the very *fact* that we are willing to ask ourselves such questions is reason enough to hope! For these questions lead us towards *life* ~ they lead us towards the life that Jesus has promised. They are questions that give us our first foothold in the journey towards being made well. It truly is not difficult ~ it is not difficult at all to imagine ourselves sitting next to whatever pool we have been sitting by and engaging Jesus in prayer. To *seriously* engage Jesus, in a long conversation, without interruptions and without distractions, confessing whatever fears we have and asking Jesus for his advice, his counsel, his direction ~ and, most of all, for his help.

For he will give it. As long as we are willing to do *our* part in the journey towards being made well, Jesus will most certainly do his. As long as we are willing to go to him when things get tough; when temptations to take a shortcut run high; when our fears run amuck; Jesus will indeed give us what we need and love us through to our journey's end. Amen.