

LOVING THE LOST AND CONFUSED

John 5:1-9

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, May 5, 2013

Last Sunday's sermon was about living generously or more to the point, loving lavishly on Jesus' command. It's was still another in a series of sermons being preached during this Easter Season on the implications of the charge given to the congregation at the end of every worship service compelling us to go out to our neighborhood, as Cathy Lawson put it in her inspired Minute for Mission, to "bring...heal... touch...and kick for Jesus."

I also explained that the phrase "the lost and confused people in your neighborhood" isn't meant to be a put down because all of us, in one way or another, become lost and confused when not allowing Christ to be front and center, loving and guiding us into the reality he called the Kingdom of God.

Today's scripture passage taken from John's Gospel tells the story of one of these lost and confused people who unexpectedly had his miserable life given back to him whole and new. Like most of the people Jesus healed this man was a hopeless invalid. For thirty-eight years his life was spent spread eagle on a mat, just a stones throw away from a pool of water believed to have restorative powers. Every so often, when the water "stirred, that was the cue for all the invalids camped out by the pool to elbow their way to the front of the line and dip themselves into the life-healing waters. Unfortunately, because the man had no one to help him, there he stayed, for thirty-eight years, roughly the general population's average life span at that time.

Try to imagine what this poor man endured, not only day after day and year after year, but decade after decade. The cure for his illness was just a few feet away, but it might as well have been all the way to the moon. Maybe only a few of us ever had to live with serious physical disabilities but many of us know what it's like living with emotional and spiritual disabilities. This man who camped out so near and yet so far from the healing waters is an apt metaphor for anyone who remains lost and confused because there's no apparent way out, or there's no one who cares enough to take the time and effort to point the way.

Some of us remember hearing the Gospel of Positive Thinking or its second generation knock off, The Power of Possibility Thinking. I won't say there wasn't any merit to this strain of populist Christianity. Certainly enough people were inspired to rise above their difficulties by trusting in God and maintaining a positive attitude. But it seems to me there was always the suggestion that you yourself were ultimately responsible for pulling yourself up by your boot straps and if you couldn't, maybe your faith wasn't strong enough or worse, you weren't good enough. Instead you were kind of

like that poor schmuck who could never get ahead of the other poor schmucks frantically pushing themselves to the head of the line to be the first one to get into the pool.

Having said that, you may be wondering, “Why was this guy stuck in the same rut for thirty-eight years?” I have a few thoughts.

My first thought, this poor man honestly didn’t know what to do to help himself. Maybe you know what I’m talking about, especially if you’ve been in the same rut most of your life accommodating yourself, as much as possible, to the hand that was dealt you. Even so, that sense of resignation can never satisfy your deepest longings. In the words of one of the great sages of my own generation, “I can’t get no satisfaction. Cause I try and I try and I try... Hey, hey, hey...that’s what I say...”

My second thought, it’s possible this lost and confused guy is a helpless case, a whiner and a slacker. He makes excuses for himself, blames everybody else for his troubles and sabotages any attempt to help. Maybe that’s why there’s no one left to carry him to the pool, he drained and burned his family and friends so they reluctantly gave up trying to help him because he used and abused them once too often. Unfortunately there are people like this and until they, as Dear Abby once put it “wake up and smell the coffee” they’ll stay stuck and miserable.

But, consider this third possibility: this broken man had no one to help him to help himself. If this is true, we can’t blame him. This guy’s frustrated, but equally ready to pour everything he’s got into getting his life back. Problem is he’s one of the neighborhood’s best kept secrets. No one knows enough about him to care about him so he’s left behind while others get ahead of him into the pool.

Now comes the time to ask the weekly question, “What is God trying to communicate to us through this story about ourselves being lost and confused but also being a loving presence to other lost and confused people in our neighborhood as we are commanded?”

Let’s begin by acknowledging the Church is full of people who are lost and confused. Some of us, not knowing how to even begin facing their issues, suffer silently under the radar while others ask for prayer and friendship, a guiding hand and a shoulder to lean on while walking through the valley of shadows, and when they finally pass through it, praise God for their healing but also dedicate themselves to bring Christ and his Gospel to other lost and confused people.

Jesus asked him, “Do you want to be made well?” You may think this a silly question, but sometimes it needs to be asked before the healing process can begin. We have the responsibility to do all we can to help ourselves, but the ultimate responsibility for our healing has been taken on by Jesus himself.

Today through Word and Sacrament we remember Jesus and accept his invitation to join him in the Upper Room to catch a glimpse of the Heavenly Banquet being

prepared for us through the sacrifice of his body and blood so together we can enter into his passion and experience his resurrection. But also remember what Jesus commanded us to do when we get up from his table. Go out and look for the lost and confused in your neighborhood. Bring health to the sick, raise the dead, touch the untouchables, kick out demons. Live generously and don't worry how these things can be accomplished through you, because God will make it happen.

If you know what it means being lost and confused, if you know what it's like being alone and helpless, and if Jesus has saved you from it all, how can you not go out and do likewise.