

What do you really want?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 25 May 2025

A Reflection by Rev Vladimir Korotkov

Easter 6C

John 5: 1-9

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

1. The contradictions of society and religion

In our reading in John 5 we read that Jesus visits Jerusalem during a religious holiday. All Jewish males were to attend the Temple at least three times a year. Yet Jesus does not go and worship in the temple! Instead, he goes to the pool named Bethesda near the Sheep Gate at the far northern corner of the Temple Mount! There Jesus encounters many variously abled people—blind, lame, and paralysed.

As Fritz Wendt notes in his article: *The politics of scripture: Addressing Poverty when the System Fails*:

Jesus bypasses all the centres of power of Jerusalem and goes to a place where no one has power. This hospital-like place around the pool is dank and smelly and filled with people lying around, waiting for a miracle, hoping for wholeness and new life.

The Sheep Gate is mentioned in Nehemiah and was probably used to wash the sheep being brought to the Temple for sacrifice. Most temple worshippers would avoid this place, it was unclean. The Hebrew word 'Bethesda' comes from two words: (*bayit*) meaning house and (*hesed*), meaning kindness or fidelity. Translated it means the house of kindness, mercy, faithfulness.

The house of kindness? So, the variously abled, the sick and injured, in overcrowded conditions, were not supported by the religious, social and economic systems of Jewish society, except to authorise the use of this token gesture at this pool. What a contradiction! And all societies, and the Christian church, ancient and post-democratic, have displayed such contradiction when it comes to alleviating poverty and offering significant care, support and inclusion to the poor.

2. Encountering the dried out and socially disvalued

Here at this pool, in these corridors of despair, Jesus encounters a person who has had health challenges for 38 years. The Greek word that describes him as a paralytic literally means, "dried out". Dried out in body, spirit, inner life, and meaning.

Jesus sees him. Observes his condition, probably his aged mat, the condition of his body and clothes, and discerns that he has been there for a long time. Jesus would have had compassion for this person, as we read he previously had, and even wept over their poverty and suffering.

3. The challenge of our withered truth and practice: unlearning and relearning faith and practice

Jesus sees, engages and offers this man, a stranger, marginalised, compassionate community.

So that in this engagement Jesus displays that we are all subjects with agency who interact with other subjects. We are intersubjective, so that relationality is primary. And we are to become equals and to subvert inequality. And this involves responsiveness which involves ethics.

And so, Jesus engages this person with a reflective question: *What do you really want?*

A question which seeks to activate an awakening of not just his conscious motives and reasons for his actions but his unconscious drives that govern his life and have kept him settled in powerlessness for 38 years.

So, Jesus engages his withered will and despairing desire, seeking to uncover, activate and subvert his unconscious dependence on this tokenistic pool. To activate his awareness that his desire for total well-being is sedated by the supposed magical qualities of the pool - provided by the religious-social system and its small-scale solution to those suffering ill-health. To connect to him to his powerlessness and dried up self-esteem created by society.

Now this person's awakening begins as he shares his resignation and hopelessness. As he reflects on the causes of his powerlessness. An engagement as subjects. He shares that he has no social networks to assist his way to the pool. In the Ancient Near East illness was physical and social, involving a "*disvalued state of being, in which a person's social networks have been disrupted and social significance lost*". (Malina and Rohrbaugh)

Jesus then engages him with "*stand up, take your mat and walk*"! The Greek word for "stand up" is the word used for resurrection, new life. And this man did not even know who Jesus was. And this was the Sabbath!

So in this process this person's own reflection and faith raises him to new life! An awakening to the impossible, a release of his deepest unconscious desires.

In the verses after this story in John 5:10 ff, a group of influential religious Jewish leaders are concerned that the actions of Jesus violate, transgress the sabbath; that they contradict the honour-shame culture, and the purity codes. They seek to defend the established, normative order, and they decided to persecute Jesus. The rejection of Jesus in this story, then, is a rejection of the possibility of new and unprecedented ways of knowing the Divine Source of Life and ordering the life of faith and inclusive community.

Brian Stroffregen notes that Robert Capon in *Between Noon and Three*, writes that this story operates at a number of levels:

It witnesses to the love of God in Jesus that seeks the total wellbeing and new life for this person; Jesus aroused his desire so that his withered hand is healed; he inspires his will and freedom to a new life; and enables him to reclaim his place as equal in the covenant community of his faith.

And symbolically, to introduce new insights, he carried out a prophetic task, making the point that all religious observances, such as the Sabbath, are to serve the total wellbeing of human life, particularly those marginalised by race and class.

And even further to this, Walter Brueggemann suggests that this encounter points to a prophetic task:

It is "to maintain a destabilizing presence, so that the system is not equated with reality, so that alternatives are thinkable, so that the absolute claims of the system can be critiqued."

So, in this story, John's Jesus leads readers, past and present, his sheep, to this inconvenient space and its truths to create in us unlearning and relearning!

4. Normative ways of thinking, feeling and acting is preferred to the new

The reality is that all social spaces are shaped by those who have social-political power. Those who control and distribute all resources always allocate them in the interest of those in power who amass wealth. And the political and religious leaders in our story provided extremely minimal resources for the well-being of those gathered around this pool. And they seek to silence anyone contradicting their power, policies and actions.

As Robert Capon writes;

Whenever someone attempts to introduce a radically different insight to people whose minds have been formed by an old and well-worked-out way of thinking, [they are] up against an obstacle. Their taste, as Jesus said, for the old [ways of thinking, feeling and acting] is so well established that they invariably prefer it to the new. ...

The new insight is always at odds with the old way of looking at things.

O'Day (*John, The Interpreter's Bible*) writes:

The rejection of Jesus in this story, then, is a rejection of the possibility of new and unprecedented ways of knowing God and ordering the life of faith. It is no accident that the Fourth Evangelist uses a healing story as the catalyst for this rejection (see also John 9), because a healing miracle simultaneously challenges conventional understandings of how the world is ordered and gives concrete embodiment to the new possibilities. The double foci of the dialogue of 5:9b-18 reinforces the double aspect of the miracle. The "Jews" focus on the challenge to the conventional order, whereas the healed man and Jesus' focus on the new possibilities, the man's new life. [p. 581]

Conclusion: Creating unlearning and relearning in self and community

This story actually is about us!

Yes, it is a call to address the causes of poverty.

And, further, it is a call to unlearn and relearn who we are, as self and its inner life, and community!

It is call to an awakening that to be human is to engage with another subject. That the other is not an object of poverty, condition or identity but an equal subject.

Jesus broke the rules of his ancient honour-shame culture, where power is hierarchical and only those at the same socio-cultural-economic level relate to each other in an open space.

When I worked at Edward Eager Lodge, a shelter and home for homeless people in Bourke Street Darlinghurst as a manager of the centre, it took me many months to learn how to be an equal; power slippage is subtle and insidious.

So, we are called to live out the notion that to be human we are intersubjective, so that relationality and meaning making between equals is primary. And this involves responsiveness which involves ethics. And that this requires unlearning which involves learning about our unconscious, as the person in our text learnt in his reflective process.

As Kelly Oliver writes:

We are called to critically examine not only our conscious motives and reasons for our actions and values but also our unconscious drives and affects that affect, even govern if not to determine those very actions and value. Without such self-examination and questioning, without interpreting and reinterpreting the meaning of our actions and values, we risk ... being shaped by empty and meaningless principles in whose name we kill off otherness ... (Kelly Oliver, *The colonisation of psychic space*, xxiii)

But this means, as Kelly Oliver says Derrida suggests, if we are to enact “*a justice worthy of its name*”

We need to go beyond traditional moral theory that holds individuals responsible for their actions ... [we need] a truly hyperbolic ethics (borrowing from Derrida) that holds us all responsible not only for our actions, beliefs, desires, values and the other's response but also our unconscious bodily drives and affects. (Oliver, xxiii)