

Get Up and Walk  
Nov. 11, 2012  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Texts: Isaiah 35:3-6, John 5:2-18

In 1883, in the small town of Summerville, Georgia, my great, great grandfather chose a spot to build a new family home. An old Victorian, it stood tall and prominently on a hill above an ancient natural spring. For years afterward, family and friends gathered down by that spring, under the shade of willows and oaks, where the earth volunteered cool waters as relief on hot, southern, summer days.

People have always been drawn to natural springs - cool springs, warm springs, hot springs, Mother Nature's Jacuzzis, often bubbling with mineral-rich waters thought to heal body and soul.

They did the same in Jesus' day, as we heard in our New Testament reading. In John's account, Jesus finds a man who, day after day, lay helplessly by a spring near one of five gates to the great city of Jerusalem. When the healing waters bubbled up, however, he never seemed to make it into the water. Others would somehow get in before him.

This story shows that tough-love side of Jesus, one we're apt to overlook or forget if we're not careful. When Jesus asks if the man wants to be healed, the man tells Jesus how he can never get to the waters in time. Jesus gives a rather unexpected response.

"Do you want to be healed?" Jesus asks.

"Rise, take up your pallet and walk."

What? Come on, Jesus. Where's the empathy? Where's the comforting pastoral touch that shows Jesus knows what it's like to suffer, to feel helpless and alone? In this case, at least, one wonders whether Jesus skipped out on pastoral care class.

But that's not what this text is about. Jesus demonstrates pastoral qualities in many other stories in the gospels. But this story is about "action-Jackson" Jesus, a man of decisive intent.

The man who is healed seems to be just as decisive. He does exactly as Jesus says. He picks up his mat and leaves. The story takes a twist when some uptight religious leaders ask the man why he is carrying his mat on the Sabbath. In their eyes, that amounted to labor, a violation of the old Hebrew law. Those religious leaders then go after Jesus for telling the man to carry his mat. At that point, the tale becomes another

chapter in Jesus' efforts to get people to understand that the world has changed. The tradition-bound fathers of the faith fail to get it, again, which is a recurring theme in the Gospel of John.

But that is not what interests me about this story, at least today, at least this morning.

This story came to mind last weekend as I was wondering about where we as a nation and a church family would be today. That was before we knew the results of the election and what those results would reveal about the state of our union. This story spoke to me because I knew then that, one way or another, about half of American would be feeling lost and disoriented, while the other half might be feeling like victors.

This story spoke to me, I suppose, because that mix of reactions may be how we feel today. But that's just today. The larger truth is that – like the man who lay by the pool for 38 years - we've been paralyzed for a much longer time. As a nation, we've been sitting by the pool, complaining and whining about what the other people do or don't do. And I guess I've been wondering this week what Jesus would say to us as the church, as the body of Christ.

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Understanding that I wouldn't know about our nation's choice until late Tuesday night, I turned Monday and Tuesday to a couple of books I've been meaning to read. The first is by Congressman John Lewis. He played a key role in the civil rights movement to overcome what he called the "unholy order" of segregation in the South. In his introduction to the book, historian Douglas Brinkley calls the book a "homily on civility." I don't know about you but that's just what I needed at the end of this long and ugly campaign season.

In the book titled Across That Bridge, Lewis speaks to what he calls the "unique hostility of our times." I will quote one passage at length. He writes:

All of our struggles here are based on one erroneous, pervasive, and persistent belief that we are somehow separated from the divine, that some of us have more light than others, therefore making them more deserving than others .... At the root, that is why we are engaged in a struggle now in the Congress led by a group of people who truly believes their role is to defend the privileges of the elite. They defend tax breaks for the rich and ask for trillions in cuts to the safety nets that protect the middle class, the elderly, the sick, and the poor, because, in essence, they believe one group is more important than the other and one contributes more good than the other.

That is actually an illusion that is blind to the interdependence of the entire creation, which unites the weak with the strong, the privileged with the poor, and the ugly with the beautiful. (We are in turmoil) because we are in conflict with the truth ....<sup>1</sup>

This conflict, Lewis goes on to say, reflects the “unholy order” of our times. I believe that unholy order exacts a spiritual cost on our nation. It’s a spiritual cost that lulls us into accepting the status quo without a fight. It dulls us into thinking we can’t really throw off corrupt systems that injustice in the workplace, in the economy, in the financial markets, in our courts, in civic and national halls of government. It’s a spiritual cost that pulls us back into polarized camps where compromise is a dirty word and hope and faith are shoved in a drawer.

In this book Lewis reminds us that we cannot afford to accept this unholy order. Just as in the civil rights movement, change can come, he reminds us, from “persistent, dedicated, determined action” seasoned with the balance of patience and urgency. When you pray, the old African proverb says, move your feet.

The second book I spent time with while waiting for the election to pass came from a different set of voices. It is a collection of essays on social justice by young adults, emerging leaders who are today about the age of John Lewis when he was leading civil rights marches across the South.

One emerging leader in the Disciples of Christ tradition writes these words:

“Justice is a ‘big’ word. What it lacks in size, it makes up for in stature. It represents concepts that provide essential foundations for our system of fairness and government.”

It is, he wrote, “the idea of creating an egalitarian society ... based on the principles of equality and solidarity, that understands and values human rights and that recognizes the dignity of every human being.”

That author lifts up those famous words from Micah 6:8 that command us to “act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.”

“Simply put,” he says, “Micah 6:8 says ... that it’s not all about you ... or me. But it is about how you and I choose to live in this world. Justice demands that we elevate the rights of others, relative to our own. Mercy commands that we take another person’s situation into account, his or her experience and obstacles and potential. Humility requires us to continually keep our wants and needs in perspective and to think of how they affect those around us.”

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<sup>1</sup> P. 174

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So, with these voices running through my head, I sat down Tuesday night to watch the election returns with the family. Those returns seemed to send a range of messages loud and clear:

That you can't get elected by punting on specific plans and ideas.

That elections can't be bought by replacing those specifics with all the 30-second TV ads that money can buy.

That you can't paint almost half the nation as lazy dependents with massive victim complexes and think that you can talk your way out of it, much less be seen as a leader of all the people.

Instead, it was a moment in our history when the voices of women and minorities, Latinos in particular, rang out and expressed their ascendancy in our national dialogue.

All of that is just some of what we heard Tuesday.

To be sure, none of it reduces the complexity of what we have ahead of us as a nation or, here at Caldwell church, as people of God. As John Lewis writes, there is still much to be done to make this nation into the "beloved community" that we long for.

So, brothers and sisters, in a sense we as a nation are like the man lying by the pool in Jerusalem the day Jesus walked by. We have our own kind of paralysis. We are weighed down by our own inertia as a national people.

And I think Jesus' words to us would probably be the same as they were to the man beside the pool. "Get up and walk."

"Get up and get to work."

"Get up and get going. Take the next step in building the kingdom I described to you when I said: 'Treat others as you'd like to be treated.' 'The last shall be first and the first shall be last.' And 'As you have done it to the least of these, you've done it to me.'"

With those words ringing in our ears, we should keep three points of this story about call in mind.

First, the man beside the pool had made a life out of sitting by that pool, begging and moaning that he never made it to the water in time. We're all liable to do the same, aren't we? That is, make a life out of giving in to our challenges. Make a life out of bitterness and complaint that someone always gets there before us. Make a life out of

believing that all that is wrong with the world, our nation, our city or our neighborhood can't be changed or that we aren't the ones to do it.

To that, I can't help but think Jesus would say. "Get up and walk."

Second, this story does not say a word about the faith of that man who one minute was laying by the pool and the next was strutting down the street. This isn't a story about his merit or lack of it. It's not about whether his faith somehow had earned his healing by the Messiah. That is not how it works with God's grace.

Instead, it is a reminder that Jesus Christ came full of grace and truth to reorder the world. In Christ, God introduced a new order, the dawn of a holy order, of a beloved and just community. And, in Christ, God has equipped us to build the kingdom, sometimes with urgency, sometimes with patience, but always, as Congressman Lewis said, through "persistent, dedicated, determined action."

A third and final point to this story is that we will always find reasons to condemn what is right, if we want to. The religious leaders of Jesus' day don't marvel at the man's healing and recovery. They don't run out to all corners of Jerusalem to share the good news of Jesus' healing power.

Instead, they intensify their efforts to catch Jesus on a technicality, a Sabbath violation of telling the man he could carry his mat on a Sunday. They react out of their own pride and insecurity, a desperate attempt to cling to their little bit of power from an old and outdated view of God's transformation of the world.

Jesus said to the critics of his day – and of ours: "My father is still working and I also am working."

As people of God, we have heard Jesus' command to join him: Get up. Pick up your mat and walk.

Amen.

