

## A Second Look

I must confess I have always read this gospel lesson from the perspective of “blaming the victim.”

How, I found myself asking, can someone sit for 38 years anywhere and not get done what needs to be done, somehow, using one’s wit or imagination or skill?

But taking a step back, perhaps there is more going on this morning at the Sheep Gate pool side than first meets the eye.

Maybe this story is not so much about a single healing miracle, although it is that in part; but maybe it’s also about how we encounter God, that perhaps we too are sometimes those who sit pool side, unable to get where we need to go – if we are to experience the grace and glory and sheer peace of God.

And to get to that “more going on” let me share with you this story.

It’s told by a Turkish man about some friends of his.

It seems these friends lived in a distant corner of Turkey and they had a son who went on to become a highly regarded doctor.

The son lived far away in the big city and they rarely spoke, this being before the days of the internet and cell phones.

One day the Turkish man visited his old friends and there in the living room was a large chest, and on it, the parents had placed their various tea sets, and they were quite proud of the decorations.

They enjoyed sitting in front of it and admiring this new piece of furniture.

“It’s a gift from our son,” they proudly explained!

But something about the chest bothered the friend, and after a few visits, he finally asked the parents if he could take a closer look.

And when he did, he turned the chest around, removed some remaining packing material, and discovered that this wasn’t a chest for tea sets at all; it was a fully functioning ham radio set which, for the under 30 crowd, is the way folks talked to each other from far away in the days before Face Time and Instagram. C. Bourgeault, Trinity, \_\_\_, paraphrased.

Rather than a piece of furniture to be gawked at and admired was instead the very means to communicate with their beloved son.

And thinking about this story, and the story of the man sitting pool side for 38 years, got me to thinking about people sitting in church for 38 or 18 or 88 years, and about those who will never enter a church.

It got me thinking about my own relationship with God, and how often I have mistaken the stirring waters and ham radio sets, in other words, how often I have mistaken invitations to encounter the Living God, for simply a nice piece of furniture.

Jesus never said: “Worship me.”

Jesus always and everywhere says: “Follow me.”

And yet for most of the nearly 2000 years since he walked the dusty roads of ancient Israel, we have declined the invitation to follow, and have instead taken up the far easier task of worship.

We have too often and for too long decided that it's far better to admire the tea set rather than to communicate with, and to be changed by, our beloved.

And the change we are invited to undergo has almost nothing to do with accomplishing or achieving something and everything to do with learning the mysterious wisdom that the only place we actually encounter God is in the midst of letting go.

Letting go of grudges or resentments.

Letting go of that sometimes almost irresistible need to control people, places and things, particularly those we love the most, particularly when we are convinced we are in the right.

Paradoxically, rather than enslaving us to the whims of others, letting go brings a freedom that is hard to imagine.

Instead of getting wrapped up in trying to make life unfold as I want it to, we suddenly enter the flow of life as it is meant to unfold; often with results that are not only surprising, but delightful!

Paul's adventures this morning underline what a surrendered life can look like.

Today, Paul's adventures begin with a vision...

His itinerary says it's time to go to Asia, but those plans are nixed by the Risen Lord, the world's first travel agent!

And in that role, Our Lord sends Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia.

Macedonia back then is a part of what is now Greece.

So Paul changes plans, gets with the new assignment, and begins a journey that would make old Jonah and his whale proud.

Paul's trip is like taking a small boat from Oahu to Maui (about 60 miles) in rough seas, then from Maui to the Big Island, (about 100 miles), then walking from Hilo to the top of Volcano; all of which he does with "great haste."

When Paul talks about "running the good race for Christ," he's not joking!

When he reaches the end of this exhausting trip, he goes looking for a Jewish synagogue and for the 10 men needed to make a quorum for the Sabbath prayer to begin.

But there is no synagogue, nor are there 10 Jewish men.

You might expect Paul to be mad or at least chagrined that all that hurried travel brings him not to a synagogue, nor to any men, but to a riverbank and a few women; gentile women at that.

But Paul is neither upset nor chagrined, because Paul understands that to love Jesus is to do what Jesus does, even when it comes with hardship, even when it seems things aren't going as expected.

Because Jesus spares no effort for us; Jesus goes to every length for us and with us, and then even farther: and Jesus is chock full of surprises for those who take their chances with him.

So what does Paul do when things don't turn out as expected?

Let him tell you: "We sat down and spoke with the women."

What a way to live!

Just taking things as they come.

Trusting, as Blessed Julian says, that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well!"

Little does Paul know that on that riverbank sits the beginnings of the most faithful community the young church will ever know, the church at Philippi.

The Philippian church will soon support Paul's mission with money, prayers and deep friendship.

No wonder Paul later writes to them:

"My dear, dear friends, I love you so much!

You make me feel such joy, you fill me with such pride." Phil. 4:1 (The Message).

One of the women at the riverbank this morning is Lydia.

Funny how so many Christian denominations, including our own Episcopal Church until the 1970's, exclude women from the ministry when in the early church, there are women all over the place in positions of leadership!

So here we are with Lydia, a woman selling purple cloth, the cloth of the well to do, the cloth of royalty.

She's probably pals with Beyoncé and Cher and maybe even the Trumps!

But Lydia is also this:

A woman whose heart and mind are open to a radically new way to encounter life, to encounter God.

And because of this openness, she is the first European Christian.

She is, quite literally, the mother in faith of every European Christian.

Her legacy begins this morning, on a riverbank; all arising out of the serendipity of Paul taking life as it comes, letting go of control, and going with the flow of the wild and unpredictable Spirit of God!

As usual, it is a poet who says it best when we come face to face with the Reality that is the living God.

God is not rescuer.

God is not safety.

God is not benevolent or critical Father-knows-best.

God is not puppet or puppeteer.

God is not who I thought/was taught he is.

God is love

reckless, spendthrift, indiscriminate, passionate.  
God is pursuer  
relentless, determined, tireless seeker of my soul.  
God is challenger  
demanding movement, journey, change, growth.  
God is creator  
delighted in me, her creation.  
God is nurturer  
feeding her hungry children at the breast.  
God is teacher  
eager to share her knowledge and wisdom.  
God is dancer and music maker.  
God is spirit, wind, and fire  
uncontainable,  
she will not tolerate the tidy boxes  
we painstakingly construct for  
her.  
God is light  
exposing, revealing, searching out all that I would hide.  
God is unknowable  
yet constantly revealing herself to me  
with a richness and intensity I cannot ignore.  
God knows me  
penetrates and forms me  
recognizes and claims me  
as she has  
from my mother's womb.  
-The Reverend Virginia Going

The door through which the love of Jesus beckons is a door leading to  
an adventurous life!

A life of risk to be sure; a life of suffering perhaps; and most definitely a life that calls us off of our couches, out of our comfort zones, and into the great unknown that we call God.

As we settle into these pews here, don't be misled.

What may appear to be simply some lovely furniture, lovely tea sets to admire, is in truth the very furnace of God's love.

That the bread and wine you shall soon consume, is the very body and blood of the one who holds all things together, consuming you as you consume it.

So that you may never forget that you contain, in your essence, the very fullness of God.

+amen