

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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Lesson 5 - John 5:1-47

A Miracle at the House of Mercy Jesus Visits Bethesda (John 5:1-18)

Jesus returned to Jerusalem for a religious festival. Jews were expected to go to Jerusalem for the three greatest feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Very likely, this was the Jewish feast of Pentecost, which occurred fifty days after Passover and celebrated the giving of the covenant at Sinai.

Jesus entered the city by the Sheep Gate, through which sheep were brought to the temple for sacrifice. He visited a miracle shrine, Bethesda, the House of Mercy. It was situated near the Sheep Gate. He saw the centerpiece of the shrine, a pool where healing miracles periodically occurred. One tradition stated that an angel came from time to time and stirred the waters. The first one into the pool after that would be cured. In any event, miracles occurred after intermittent bubblings of the waters. Around the pool were five porches where the sick, blind, and crippled would wait for a possible healing.

Archaeologists have discovered this pool, just as described in John, near St. Anne's Church. It is 220-feet wide and 315-feet long. Colonnades on all sides frame the porches. Stairways at the corners facilitated entrance into the waters. Springs were the probable sources of the waters. Changes in water pressure could cause the "stirring or bubbling effect" noted by the gospel.

Jesus met a man there who told him his sad story. He had been ill for thirty-eight years. Painfully, he had made his way to the House of Mercy many times but never obtained a cure. Jesus asked him if he would like to be healed. He told Jesus he had no friend to help him get into the pool after the stirring of the waters. He was too slow to get in on time. Jesus told him to arise, pick up his mat and walk. The poor man felt charged with amazing new energy. Joyously he stood up and walked.

This lovely incident carries forward the theme of water in John's gospel. The Baptist had preached that Jesus would baptize with water and the Spirit. Jesus had told Nicodemus that he needed the profound personal change that would be caused by rebirth in water and the Spirit. The water for washing the body at Cana was changed into wine, forecasting the Eucharistic Blood of Jesus which would cleanse our souls from the tyranny of sins.

The conversion of the Samaritan woman occurred when the waters of grace warmed her heart. Now, by a pool famed for its healing qualities, Jesus cured this man.

In healing this man's body, Jesus showed he was interested in total person, soul and body. He restored the soul of a woman by a well. He rejuvenated the body of a man by a pool. By connecting his acts with water imagery, Jesus took the simplest of elements and showed he stood for human life in its bodily and spiritual forms.

Water is absolutely necessary for life. Today we are more aware of this when we see environmental threats from chemical wastes. We worry about lead in the water that causes disease to our bodies, and acid rain that kills trees and plants. We demand living water that is healthy for our physical well being, not killing water that would harm us. In the desert culture where Jesus ministered, pure water was a valued gift. Jesus took this central fact of life & used it to illustrate the truth that his "water" of love & grace was absolutely necessary for spiritual life, which gives purpose and meaning to our bodily life.

Ultimately, only God can be the author of life. An incident linked to the cure at the House of Mercy taught that Jesus was the divine source of life. The healing occurred on the Sabbath. The religious leaders heard of this, found the man and told him he should not be carrying his mat because that was "working" on the Sabbath. He replied that the man who cured him told him to take up his mat and walk. They wanted to know the healer's identity, but the cured man had no idea who it was.

Sometime later, Jesus found the man at the temple, identified himself and told the man to sin no more. The man went to the religious leaders and let them know it was Jesus who cured him. They approached Jesus and criticized him for his behavior. In similar situations in the synoptic gospels,* Jesus argued on humanitarian grounds that this was the compassionate thing to do. Here he used a divine argument, "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work" (John 5:17). The miracle demonstrated his equality with God.

The leaders saw his point. Genesis taught that God worked six days and rested on the seventh, or Sabbath. But that meant God had finished the works of creation. God obviously still had to "work" because he was sustaining the world by his providential care. That is what Jesus meant when he said that "My Father is working until now." By adding, "So I am at work," he identified himself with God. He does what God does. This was blasphemy to the ears of the religious leaders, an act deserving of death. The text says they made plans for his death, for he made himself equal to God.

Jesus Strives to Awaken Spiritual Awareness (John 5:19-30)

We all live at the edge of mystery and ignore it. We do not surrender to the stillness that would open us to God. We turn our inner light away from God. We build a screen between ourselves and God, each day putting more shadows on it until the darkness is so great we cannot believe God can be present to us.

We plunge our energies into surviving and cease to appreciate the life we have preserved. We let ambition consume us and then lament what it produces for us.

Jesus saw this problem in the faces of the religious leaders. They were the ministers of the mystery of God, yet they failed to sense the divine warmth when it came to them in the person of Jesus. What locked their awareness? In general, we can say they were too involved in themselves to see God visiting them in Jesus.

Their sense of self was tied up with controlling the way God can be experienced. They were in the business of making people be submissive to them in religious matters. They sought their pleasure in the sheer mastery of others. They forgot that the rituals, beliefs and ceremonies of religion, committed to their care, were like pure windows that could reveal divine Love inviting people to receive affection and forgiveness.

Jesus did not treat them with hostility or disdain. He strove to loosen them from their self imprisonment, their attachment to a self that enjoys controlling religious mystery.

To help them see, Jesus took a simple example of a young man apprenticing to his father, much as he himself did in the carpenter shop of his father Joseph. The novice is expected to learn by looking at what his father does.

The wisdom of the carpenter is passed onto the son who observes carefully how to cut, sand, shape, varnish, paint, and respect the grain of the wood. When the son takes his turn at the bench, the father watches to see that the apprentice does what he has seen. Mere observation becomes personal experience. In time, the gifts of the son cause him to bring his own creativity to the task, but only after carefully imitating the process he witnessed from his father. As the son matures both in the skill and a creativity unique to him, the father smiles. Father and son have become one in a mutual goal.

Jesus drew his listeners to see that his relationship with his heavenly Father was something like that, only more intimate and effective. A carpenter will simply evoke a chair or a table from a piece of wood. But God the Father does a lot more. The Father gives life. So does the Son. Gently Jesus tried to make them see that the gift of living health he imparted to the sick man at the House of Mercy was but a glimpse of the abundant divine life he could give them. He and the Father can share this life, this Love, with them.

Jesus appealed to their own hunger for absolute love. He tried to shake them loose from their attachment to public status. He reached into their inner lives and asked them to wake up to real affection and true religion. They were missing out on the true joy of living. They settled for less, for a cheap substitute, the small, passing pleasure of people's grudging submission to their authority.

He gave them the opportunity of a lifetime, a personal meeting with God, as physical and historical as human presence can get. This was not a dry theology lesson, but a personal encounter, an experience of how Father and Son are so willing to love and be life giving.

Sadly, he observed their resistance, their unwillingness to let go of the selves so invested in religious control. They preferred the false self to the true one that could be on fire with desire to love and be loved magnificently. Jesus offered them the champagne of living water. They chose the stagnant water of their own prejudices.

This led to Christ's words about judgment. "(The Father) has given all judgment to his Son" (John 5:22). His listeners have been given the choice to find their real selves and thus begin a dialogue with God. Jesus respected their freedom. They were at liberty to get in touch with Love, or to refuse. They may continue with a life of pretense, or they could become real persons. Their choice brought consequences.

Every cause has an effect. If they lied to themselves, they will never find out the truth about their destiny. The glory-presence of Jesus waited there, sending forth waves of light and love. Jesus was a judge, but they will cause their own judgment by their choices. Jesus had attempted to plant in their awarenesses the seeds of their true identity, their authentic reality, their only real hope for happiness and love. He has provided a force field of grace where this could happen.

Jesus' listeners had a chance to pass from death to life. As they pondered the daring challenge he had given them, they heard him raise the issue of death. The day will come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and rise to life.

Those who emerge from the tombs with a record of love will have a resurrection unto life. Those who rise with a history of sin, will be condemned. Hence they must consider the eternal consequences of the challenge presented to them. Jesus is not just persuading them to seek temporary happiness, but everlasting joy.

The Burning Lamp and the Listener's Unbelief (John 5:31-47)

Next, Jesus appealed to their very human need to trust his credibility. If he did not seem believable, perhaps they could be convinced by others who testified on his behalf. They had admired John the Baptist. Many of them had journeyed to the Jordan, confessed their sins and been washed in the Jordan waters. It is possible they desired to believe in Jesus. What is clear from the gospel is that Jesus desired their faith even more powerfully.

Whether they liked it or not, they heard from the Baptist a ringing act of faith in Jesus. The Baptist was like a burning and shining lamp who awoke long dormant depths of faith in his listeners. Jesus invoked John's testimony on his behalf. If the Baptist believed in him, could they not open themselves to this possibility? Jesus went further and asked them to look attentively at the signs of glory he had performed.

Through these miracles, the Father testified to the Son's truth. Thus Jesus presented them with evidence from the greatest prophet of the day, and the greatest of all witnesses—God.

Jesus could see that even such powerful witnesses did not affect them. They knew so well the words of Scripture. But they failed to perceive the Living Word in front of them. They settled for a text and missed a person. The words of Scripture fell off their lips like dead leaves in autumn. The words should have risen like eagles from their hearts to meet God. Regrettably, this did not happen.

They loved the praise from the people, the praise that stroked their egos. They loved themselves too much to bother about loving God. Self absorption caused their failure to believe. This process makes the self God. But what is there about a self that it should become an idol? The self loses out when made into a mere idol. Such attachment to self is foolishness. Only attachment to the non-self, meaning a focus on God brings about genuine self realization. Seeking praise of self obtains mere flattery and shrinks the person. When the self praises God, the heart expands and the person grows.

Glorifying self is an attitude that kills faith. “How can you believe when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that is from God?” (John 5:44). Jesus had tried to be patient and gentle with them, but they were so closed to him that he decided to adopt the forthright, fiery confrontation typical of a prophet. Even this approach might have its conversion potential. Strong language has often affected the human heart.

In any case, his words were also directed at innocent bystanders. He wanted them to know what blind guides they followed. He especially caught everyone's attention when he said that the one who will forcefully accuse them of their lack of faith was Moses, who foresaw that people would reject the offer of salvation in messianic times. None of this worked as we will see in the story of the Passion. The defenders of the faith will kill the author of faith. The would-be proclaimers of salvation will crucify the savior.