



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“38”

John 5:1-9
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Thirty-eight years is a long time. Thirty-eight years ago was 1979. Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of England. Jimmy Carter was America's president. In 1979 Pittsburgh beat Dallas in the Super Bowl. John Wayne died. And the Academy Award-winning movie *Kramer vs Kramer* was released.

The sick man in our gospel story has waited on a mat for 38 years. He's been lying by the pool for so long that waiting has become a way of life.

I recently met with a couple and heard the story of their engagement. The groom described how the ring burned a hole in his pocket during the day before he got down on one knee after dinner. The wait about did him in. Circumstances dictate waiting. The wait for results after a medical test can seem endless. When we're pressed for time, waiting for a computer to start up feels like an eternity. Refugees can wait for years.

The man in our story waits. That's all he does. He believes a pool called Bethzatha offers wellness to the first one into its healing bubbles. The problem is the pool bubbles randomly. He never is first. He lies on a mat, unable to get up. Water laps gently on the steps below him. He's stuck, only a few feet away from wholeness. But he might as well be a million miles away. He's 38 years away.

He's Sisyphus from Greek mythology, doomed to push an immense rock up a hill, only to have it roll back down again. He's Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog Day*, destined to repeat the same day over and over again. For 38 years each new day ends like each prior day.

He's frustrated by circumstances beyond his control. His world is small, his quality of life poor; his neighbors invalids just like he is. His mat is his ball and chain. He can't move off his mat. The awful truth is he's become his mat. His name is Matt.

Albert Einstein once said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Matt has had 38 years to realize his hope is out of touch with reality. So many disappointments; so much suffering has drowned hope.

We don't know why Jesus chooses him. Scripture simply says Jesus knew that he had been there a long time. “Do you want to be made well?” Matt has been disabled for 38 years and Jesus asks him if he wants to get well. Jesus, pardon me, but let me answer for him. Of course he wants to get well!

Jesus waits, listens. “Do you want to be made well?” All Matt can say is, “Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”

I hear his words as an excuse. But Jesus... Jesus hears Matt's words differently. “Sir, I have no one.” “I have no one.” Those may be the saddest words in all of scripture. “I have no one.” Matt doesn't have people. No family, no friends.

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

Matt is an island. Maybe his situation is so awful that family and friends can't bear it. Maybe he has outlived his caretakers. Or maybe he's the one who is awful. Maybe he's a whiner and complainer. Maybe more than his body is sick, maybe his attitude is sick, too; both body and mind are sick.

Two weeks ago on Confirmation Sunday, Amy preached the wonderful story from Mark's gospel about four men who bring their friend on a mat to Jesus by lowering him through a roof. That man had people.

"Sir, I have no one." That's how Matt sees himself: alone, isolated, waiting.

Consider the last time you had to wait... for a table to open in a restaurant, in the TSA line at John Glenn International Airport, to hear from the child you texted.

Common experiences of waiting pale in comparison with perpetual, chronic, long-term waiting. Since 1992, the Innocence Project has worked to free the staggering number of innocent people who remain incarcerated. On March 16th the Innocence Project achieved the release of a Los Angeles man who spent more than three decades behind bars for a murder he didn't commit. His name is Andrew Wilson.

Back in 1984, a 21-year-old man was stabbed to death while he and his girlfriend were sleeping in a truck. Andrew Wilson was convicted. But key pieces of evidence were never turned over to the defense during trial. The victim's girlfriend selected Wilson's photo from a lineup only after an officer pointed to Wilson's photo and said, "What about him?" It turns out that same girlfriend had stabbed the victim in the past and was likely the perpetrator.

Andrew Wilson has been freed. He plans to move to St. Louis to live with his 96-year-old mother, who has been a tireless advocate for his exoneration. Even while imprisoned, Wilson had someone. His mother worked relentlessly on his behalf. She never stopped acting in faith or believing that miracles happen.

For three decades Wilson lost control over his life. I can't imagine what it has been like for him to stand up, take up his mat, and walk out from behind bars. About his incarceration, Wilson simply says, "Bitterness is a wasted path. I'm a free man."¹ Bitterness *is* a wasted path.

Long, unjust imprisonments. Ruggedly cruel diseases, mental health struggles full of unfathomable suffering. These scenarios are real, and particularly horrible for those who have no one.

When our daughter was in middle school, she and I spent a day volunteering for Meals on Wheels. On our deliveries we met someone like Matt. He lived in a tiny, dark, closed-in apartment. We knocked and waited and waited and waited while he shuffled behind his walker to unlock the door. At other stops our visits lifted people's spirits. Many smiled broadly and shared words of greeting. Not this man. His scowl was deep; his movements listless.

When Matt says he has no one, Jesus doesn't challenge him, as if to say, "You're right, you are alone. The life you're living feels like death. But now you have me. And I have you."

"Do you want to be made well?" The answer is not as obvious as it sounds. It can be a leap of faith to even believe we have a choice to be more whole.

¹ <https://www.innocenceproject.org/andrew-wilson-released-after-32-years/>

Jesus doesn't take Matt to the pool. He could have. He could have asked his disciples to sit with him, wait for bubbles, lift him, elbow their way through the crowd to the front and plunge him into the water, first at last.

Instead, Jesus comes to Matt on his mat; the very mat and situation he wants to escape, and speaks words of life and resurrection. "Stand up! Take up your mat and walk." Jesus gives him new legs and new life, raising him from years of death to wholeness and worth. Where there was once imprisonment, there now is freedom. The one who had no one has Someone.

"Do you want to be made well?" Jesus comes near us and asks that question. He is all about doing God's work, manifesting signs of God's glory. Not everyone gets healed. Jesus isn't a public health program. Yet here in this church community and in the life of faith, we see signs of God's glory, when we reach out to one another so no one suffers alone, when we work together so people who have no one have someone, when we proclaim a future other than bitterness.

Our Biblical story doesn't mention faith, as if God's provision doesn't ultimately depend on our faithfulness. Our story is all about Jesus, the authority he claims and the life he offers. Jesus, the faithful one, our nearest, closest companion, invites us to experience God's love, a power beyond our own.

Our lives don't have to wait to happen until we can get in the pool. They are happening now. Are you lying on your mat? Are you waiting for the pool to bubble? "Stand up, take your mat and find out." Amen.