

Easter 6
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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One Bird, or Two?

Cultural wisdom is encapsulated in wonderful little sayings and quotes that we hand down from generation to generation. One of the most colorful I have ever heard comes from the hills of Kentucky: “If you see a turtle on a fence post you know it didn't get there by itself.” Sometimes the wisdom is surprising. There is a wonderful Polish saying, “Learn a second language, gain a second soul.”

Others are more well-known:

- “A stitch in time saves nine.”
- “Measure twice, cut once.”
- “All is fair in love and war.”
- And my wife's favorite one, "Many a slip between cup and lip."

These sayings contain cultural wisdom, but they are not always Biblical, nor faithful to our faith. Perhaps one of the worst offenders in light of today's lessons, and this season is, “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” The meaning is clear. If you have one bird in hand you have a bird, if you see two in a bush you as yet have none in the hand, and at the end of the day you may very well go hungry. It is a safe saying, focusing on what one already has, guaranteeing a little, and encouraging the discipline of modesty and thrift.

But resurrection is NOT safe, it does NOT focus on what is at hand, and it guarantees, not modesty but the magnificent at the expense of what you have in your hand. The Easter story tells us of a man who risked it all, laid down his very life, and won for the world eternal life. If Jesus had thought that a bird in the hand was better than two in the bush he would never have gone to the Cross.

The Gospel lesson today helps us understand this spiritual principle. There are three players in this story, the crippled man, the crowd, and Jesus. We only have Biblical record of the interaction between Jesus and the cripple, but human nature is human nature, and brokenness is brokenness. The nature of the other relationships can be profitably gestimated.

The interaction between Jesus and the crippled man is telling. Is the man accurate in his assessment of his situation, or is he essentially whining, blaming others for his misfortune? Is he willing to endure 18 long years of pain rather than make something

happen? He begs the question, “18 years, eh? How's that working for ya?”

Jesus cuts through all of that and heals him, but the healing requires that he give up his previous life, pick up his mat and walk away. He walks away from a lot.

He walks away from unrealistic hopes. The pool was the perceived source of salvation: If he could just get into the pool. Well, if it hasn't happened in 18 years, what are the chances of something changing all of a sudden? But now he leaves it behind.

He walks away from his victimhood. “Oh, yeah, old Simeon, down at the pool—poor guy with his leg withered up like that...can't even walk. Who sinned, do you think, that he is this way, him or his parents?” This line isn't recorded here for this man, but it is for a blind man in John 9. Maybe he had come to believe it, himself—but now he leaves it behind.

He walks away from his past. This man was defined by 18 years of empty, frustrating waiting, grinding his teeth at those who moved faster than he, always maintaining a glimmer of a hope that somehow, somehow, all the pieces would finally fall together, and he would get into the pool. Now he walks away from it all.

He walks into a lot. He walks into a new relationship with himself. He can no longer think of himself as the needy one. He is...well, we are not told, but the future is wide open to him. What and who will he become? Resurrection has given him new life.

He walks into a new relationship with others. He is no longer the cripple by the pool. He is no longer the dependent one. He is no longer the whining invalid, driving people away by his sour attitude or spiteful bitterness. He stands up straight and tall, taking the place in society that was always meant to be his, and for once being able to command and give the respect that all people deserve.

He walks into a new relationship with God. He is no longer the outcast in the temple whose infirmity excluded him from worship. What is more, he has met Jesus, and that encounter has changed him irreversibly. As Jesus said of the bent woman, that Satan had had her bound for all these years, now he could also say of this man, that he has been freed from the power of the devil. Jesus has taken him out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

How about the crowd? I have always wondered what the others at the pool thought of the man. Why did someone else who had been healed not take control of the situation and make sure this man had his turn? What kind of selfishness pervaded the air to where no

one was willing to act for the sake of this man? Did not the ancient writers extol the virtue of righteousness, that said clearly that all of Israel are escaped slaves who deserved death, but from YHWH received life instead, and therefore, were to treat one another with radical, loving humility, especially the weak and suffering? Why couldn't this crowd exercise this ancient Hebrew virtue on his behalf?

What kind of healing is it that only affects the body and leaves the soul in such self-centeredness, blind to the suffering of another right beside them, and so ungrateful as to not stop and share the joy they have received? Hardly angelic.

All too often in patterns of human interaction this blind self-centeredness hides the grisly fact that they really wanted him that way. If they did not want him that way they would already have done something about it, but they have not. They have not for 18 years! It's a subconscious process that if it ever comes to light immediately dissipates. Embodying their own infirmities, he serves as a scapegoat that allows the others to act at his expense. He becomes the invisible catalyst for their own healing, all the while leaving him out.

Jesus' healing miracle here brings it to light and breaks its power. Here, the one who is not infirm reaches out a hand to the despised one, leaving the others in their astounded and self-centered weakness. He leaves them without their scapegoat. Now what are they going to do? Now who are they going to blame? Like the healed cripple, they are called to give up their previous way of life in which one of them will never be healed. They must lose the bird in the hand, the scapegoat they have all bought into, and take instead the lead of the great Revealer who acts out of love rather than out of self-interest.

How do we apply this?

There are those today who are like the man by the pool. They are caught between being a cripple and being whole. Maybe that is you this morning. Health is there, just out of reach. Financial stability is just a few dollars away. Reconciliation is desperately wanted and needed, but... Your life is pretty much in order—except... There are those who say, “Well, it's really his or her own fault. If they hadn't done this or that then they wouldn't be in this predicament. After all, our society is one of opportunity. If you work hard you can get whatever you want. If you don't have what you want it's your own fault.” Yet your experience doesn't really show that to be the case.

Jesus says, “Take up your bed and walk.” This is not positive thinking. This is an act of obedient faith. Jesus is calling you out of an old life into a new one. The ground of your being and of all being is calling into being who and what you are meant to be. But the new life will cost you something. It will cost you your previous way of thinking about

yourself. It will cost you your victimhood. It will cost you your false expectations and unrealistic hopes. It will cost you your old life. Jesus calls, will you respond?

How about the crowd? Who is the scapegoat in our society that allows us to feel whole whether we are or not? Whose misfortune is somehow necessary for our good fortune? Whose presence allows us to be cruel and inhuman without feeling guilty about it? In this election year a lot of scapegoats are being identified. They are not called scapegoats, for that would name the issue and break its power. They are called enemies, problems, or criminals, but the effect is the same.

Naming a scapegoat lays the responsibility on the scapegoaters, and this is invariably met with denial and other forms of resistance. The very violence of our rejection of the idea betrays our emotional investment in it. It reveals the painful truth we do not want to face: There are some to whose suffering society is willfully blind because to see it would reveal the injustice of a system in which so many are invested.

What would happen in our society if Jesus strode in and healed the broken one? Jesus final command to us was wonderfully expounded to you last week by Deacon Tom. "Love one another as I have loved you," and, "By this shall all the world know that you are my disciples, in that you love one another." Who has Jesus loved? Can you name someone whom Jesus has not loved? If Jesus has loved them, as he has loved us, if Jesus is willing to step into this scene and relieve the others of their scapegoat, we who are now the arms and feet and mouthpiece of Christ, have a grateful duty to do the same to society's scapegoats.

If the first application I have just laid out for you is true, then Jesus is calling the infirm to health. We are the body of Christ. It is we who speak Jesus' words. It is we who help them up off their mats. It is we who call people out of their old lives into new ones. We are called to help them walk with us, away from their old lives of brokenness and darkness into a new life of power and strength in the love of God.

Yes, this is dangerous. It is so much easier to settle for the bird in the hand, but God is calling us to the two in the bush.