



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“TAKE ANOTHER STEP”

Scripture Lessons: Genesis 5:21-24; John 5:2-18

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, May 26, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

John 5:2-18

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, ‘It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.’ But he answered them, ‘The man who made me well said to me, “Take up your mat and walk.”’ They asked him, ‘Who is the man who said to you, “Take it up and walk”?’ Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.’ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is still working, and I also am working.’ For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I presided at the memorial service for Doug Matthews, a member and friend of the Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, TN, in addition to sharing something of the Christian hope we have as followers of Jesus, I shared with those in attendance certain perspectives about his life. I talked about Doug’s late wife, Evelyn and the caretakers that had been such a blessing to him in more recent memory. I talked about how Doug had determined to finish his life strong and to teach his family how to die well. I also shared with the congregation that day a particular question that Doug asked me during one of our last visits.

This man, who was in his mid 90's, a person who knew God and knows God, someone who had enjoyed the fruits of his successful life's labors and who was blessed with a family that loved him – this man of God who knew that his time on earth was nearly finished, looked at me from across the room and with great sincerity asked, "So, Holton, what advice can you give me?"

Now, I've learned a thing or two about giving older adults advice over the years. For example, if they haven't figured out that smoking is bad for their health by the time they're in their mid-nineties, there's little sense in bringing it up; and if they want to eat a dozen Krispy Kreme donuts for breakfast every day, knock yourself out! They've earned the right.

As you might imagine, my advice to Doug had nothing to do with those sorts of things. More to the point, my advice to Doug was simply this: "Take another step," I said. "Every day, even when you don't want to, take another step!" I had learned that advice myself, as if for the first time, just a few years ago and through my experience with another man of God, named Sam Bell, who, not so incidentally, just celebrated his 100th birthday! I saw one of Sam's daughters on King Street a few months back and I shared with her the following story. I happened to be with Sam at the hospital one day. We were visiting his late wife, whose nickname was "Squirt," and, when we were done, and it was time for us to leave, I offered to pull the car around. But Sam declined, insisting that we walk to the parking garage together...and so we did. And as we walked, I remember thinking to myself, "So, that's how he does it! That's how Sam has managed to live with such vigor well into his 90's. He doesn't take shortcuts. He doesn't take the easy way out. Simply put, Sam is always determined to take one more step, even when that step is not an easy one to take. If we have lived at all, then we know that we are called upon to take another step at a variety of life's junctures, especially in times of grief and suffering.

It was our custom at First Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg to have a weekly staff meeting on Tuesday mornings, and I remember one particular Tuesday better than others...it was Tuesday, September 11th, 2001. Montaigne Hutchins, one of our colleagues – knocked on the door and interrupted our meeting with the terrible news that a plane had struck one of the World Trade Center towers. You know, there always seems to be connections with people when something so traumatic and on such a large scale takes place. It turned out that one of the members of our youth group had an aunt who was a flight attendant on one of the planes that crashed elsewhere. And I know from other conversations with our own Tom Johnson, that he was actually in one of the twin towers when the planes struck. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been for Marie to have not known for some time if Tom was safe or not, and then to finally be able to speak with him on the phone and to know that he was alive.

On this Memorial Day Weekend, we pause to remember a multitude of other occasions when people received not a good report at all, but rather the most dreadful kind of news...to learn that during a war or a conflict that someone they loved had made the ultimate sacrifice in service to our country and for the ideals that we hold dear – "a saint from whom their labors rests," and as one of the other great hymns we sang just a short time ago: "...who more than self their country loved and mercy more than life."

Oh, that kind of loss - that kind of burden - it can be unbearable! So too can the weight of any pain and sorrow; it can be like an anchor, holding us in place, trapping us in our grief. To those who give visible testimony to what it means to feel the weight of despair, what can be said? In the midst of the consolation that God provides and the strength and support that we might draw from the Christian Community, what other words of encouragement can be given? What advice can we give?

Well, perhaps one thing we can say is this: **take another step!** As difficult as it may be, as much as we may want nothing more than to pull the covers up over our heads – sometimes the best thing we can do – sometimes the only thing we can do – is to resolve ourselves to take another step!

During our recent pilgrimage to the Holy Land, one of the sites that we visited were the Pools of Bethesda, which is where the story in this morning's New Testament Lesson takes place. Today the site is more or less a ruin, but one can still look down over the railing and see the archaeological site and the framework of what was a series of reservoirs or pools, which, according to the Bible, when they were stirred, had a kind of curative effect.

The man we meet in John chapter 5 had literally been unable to take a single step for a long time...perhaps in upwards of 38 years, we are told. And we notice that he had what seemed to be a very reasonable explanation for his predicament. "Sir," he said, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

I wonder how often we are like that man – so close to those healing waters for so long...but we never seem to be able to get to them; and, like that man, at times, we inadvertently patronize ourselves with excuses, when, all-the-while, what Jesus wants from us is for us to take another step. And it really is amazing what happens when we take another step, and take it in faith.

It has been my experience when visiting people in the hospital or spending time with them after one of life's traumas, that those people who have already been in step with God, as it were – those who have actually been walking with God for an extended period of time – they are far better equipped to deal with the crises of life than those who have spent their days going it alone and who do not have that spiritual reservoir from which the followers of Christ so frequently draw.

The story of Enoch in the Old Testament is one of my favorites. So closely did Enoch walk with God that we get the sense from the Bible that they more or less walked together and that so intimate and so personal were those steps, that Enoch one day essentially walked with God to heaven. And so, perhaps we should refine our advice just a bit – "Yes! Take another step, and then another, and another one after that...but, by all means, take those steps with God; because, it is with God that our steps find meaning and purpose, and, ultimately, they find fulfillment.

In this way, ours really is a journey...a series of steps, if you will! And with each passing step, and by God's grace, we will bear witness to the one with whom we make them – the one in

whom the Bible tells us we live and move and have our being. And of course, we are not always talking about literal steps. We are talking about an intentionality with which we live our life and actually live into God's future; and, believe you me, this doesn't mean that our next steps will always be easy just because we have put our faith in Jesus Christ! To be certain, not every moment along the way will leave us feeling strong and courageous! On the contrary, there will still be times when it is all we can do to put one foot in front of the other and to take that step.

Surely we wouldn't think to presume that just because the man in our story was healed that his steps would be easy from that point forward. In fact, no sooner had he been healed than he was called before the religious officials and interrogated about the nature of his healing and his relationship with Jesus. It begs the question: What should our steps say about our relationship with Jesus? What about our life would serve to testify to the God who is very much at work in it?

I've often wondered how this man who sat so close to the Pools of Bethesda must have felt when day after day, year after year, he watched able-bodied people all around him wasting their steps – people who had all the capacity in the world to make a difference...to think, and do, to speak, but whose life seemed so devoid of action, so devoid of any measure of responsibility.

When I was a student at Columbia Theological Seminary, I took a class under Dr. Walter Bruegemann who, if he said it once, he must have said it a thousand times...that throughout the Bible there are certain consistent and undeniable Biblical themes – and the one that he seemed to gravitate to more than any other was any power we have should be used in service to the powerless. We see that from Genesis to Revelation. I think of those people who every day seemed to cut in front of the man in this story, which is to say nothing of the others who were surely there and who could have helped him get into the pool when the waters were stirred, but instead chose to do nothing.

In contrast, I am reminded of those among us, who, when a need exists, have demonstrated not only the capacity, but also the faith and the wherewithal and the ingenuity to actually take another step and meet the needs of the world. We do this in and through our mission committees every year and throughout the year, whether we are serving as part of an international mission team with boots on the ground or through our collective gifts of prayer and time and substance to those local agencies like 180 Place or My Sister's House or the Star Gospel Mission — indeed these are just a few of the steps that we are called to take as the church called forth.

Friends, that's the nature of taking another step; it moves us from one place to another; and, praise be to God, that at that time when we who now believe but were once lost, Jesus found us, and loved us, and called us to repent and to believe and to take our next best steps with God, and so we do! And those steps by God's grace, not only do they give us hope, and assurance, and strength for each new day, but inasmuch as those steps are taken in such a way that we glorify God, make disciples and address those human needs around us, oh, our steps

will prove to be a blessing to others, and will perhaps help them to take their own steps into God's promised future.

When our time on this earth is finished, and when people gather at our memorial service to worship God and celebrate our life, and when they gather to hear about perspectives of who we were, what we stood for, what we believed in, I wonder what they will hear? I pray that at the very least they will hear that we took another step, because sometimes, that's all we could do. May they hear that we took another step with God and with one another and in joyful response to God's blessings in our life, because we could not help but to do so. And may they hear that we took another step with a profound sense of responsibility toward the least and the lost, because we simply could not do otherwise.

Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, help us by your grace to take the steps that you would have us to take as your children. Give us the strength to take them when they are not easy...give us the faithfulness to take them when no one is looking...and give us the thankfulness for having had the opportunity to take them at all! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*