

# Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – May 19, 2019

## John 5:1-9

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

(Note: This text is actually an alternate reading for *next* week in the Revised Common Lectionary. Worship themes for this week and next were traded to accommodate changes in Sr. High Youth Sunday)

### Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

### Commentary on John 5:1-9

(From Elisabeth Johnson, *workingpreacher.org*, May 1, 2016)

The man healed in this story is perhaps the least willing and the least grateful of all the people Jesus heals in John's Gospel.

The setting of the healing is a pool called Bethzatha near the Sheep's Gate in Jerusalem (John 5:2). Lying in the porticos around this pool are many invalids -- blind, lame, and paralyzed (5:3). The earliest manuscripts of John do not explain why the invalids are there, but later scribes added an explanation that appears in certain manuscripts (5:4). According to this explanation, people believed that an angel of the Lord would come and stir the waters, and that whoever was the first to enter the pool after the waters were stirred would be healed of his or her malady.

When Jesus sees a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years lying there (John 5:5), he asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” (5:6). We might expect a resounding “Yes!” Instead, the man offers a complaint, “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” (5:7).

Jesus responds to the man's complaint by saying, “Stand up, take your mat and walk” (John 5:8). Immediately the man is healed and takes up his mat and walks (5:9). At the end of verse 9, the narrator adds, “Now that day was a Sabbath.” This is where our lectionary reading ends, but the attentive reader or hearer will recognize that this is not the end of the story. As is always the case, Jesus' healing of someone on the Sabbath creates problems.

As the story progresses, the man will be confronted by “the Jews,” i.e., Jewish religious authorities, who tell him that because it is the Sabbath, it is not lawful to carry his mat (John 5:10). The man responds that he is only doing what

the man who healed him told him to do (5:11). When asked who it was who healed him, the man responds that he does not know (5:12-13).

Later Jesus encounters the healed man in the temple, and then the healed man proceeds to tell the Jewish authorities that it was Jesus who healed him (John 5:14-15). So the authorities begin to persecute Jesus because he has healed on the Sabbath (5:16). When Jesus tells them that he is simply doing the work of his Father (5:17), the Jewish authorities seek all the more to kill Jesus, "because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" (5:18).

If ever we are tempted to think that God's healing depends on the quality or quantity of a person's faith, this passage offers a strong corrective. The man whom Jesus heals shows no sign of faith in Jesus or of gratitude for what Jesus has done for him. When confronted by the religious authorities about carrying his mat on the Sabbath, he deflects blame to the man who healed him, whose name he has not even bothered to learn. And when he meets Jesus again and learns his name, he immediately tells the authorities the identity of the man they seek. Perhaps the man thinks that if the authorities go after Jesus, they will leave him alone.

The religious authorities are convinced that Jesus is a sinner because he heals on the Sabbath. From the perspective of John's Gospel, however, unbelief is the fundamental sin; it is rejection of the One sent by God. When Jesus meets the healed man in the temple, he tells him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you" (John 5:14).

The "sin" that Jesus refers to is the sin of unbelief. There are worse things than being reproached by religious authorities for breaking the Sabbath. If the man persists in his unbelief and indifference to Jesus, he risks incurring the judgment of God, which matters far more than that of the religious authorities.

The man, though made well, seems blind to the power and presence of God in Jesus and more concerned about his standing with those in positions of earthly power. He wastes no time in reporting Jesus' identity to the authorities, presumably knowing that they will turn their judgment on Jesus. The good that Jesus does is met not with faith or gratitude, but with persecution. Yet Jesus continues doing the life-giving work of his Father, regardless of the consequences.

One might wonder why Jesus chose this particular man to heal out of all the invalids lying around the pool of Bethzatha. It seems like he could have made a better choice! Yet here we see that the compassion and healing power of Jesus are not reserved only for those who are "deserving" -- for those whose faith is great and who respond to healing by believing in and following Jesus. Certainly Jesus heals such people also. But here Jesus heals one whose lack of faith leads him to cooperate with those who persecute Jesus, who even seek to kill Jesus (John 5:18).

John's Gospel does not answer the question of why certain people are healed and others are not. But this passage makes it clear that healing is not a matter of having "enough" faith (as if that could be measured). That is not how Jesus operates. Clearly Jesus does not heal for the benefits to himself in gratitude or praise or devotion. He heals people simply because this is the work of his Father (John 5:17).

After this passage, Jesus goes on to say, "Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing ... Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes" (John 5:19, 21).

John's Gospel tells us from the beginning that "no one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18). The God whom Jesus makes known is a God who does not discriminate in giving good gifts, a God who wills that all may have life, and have it abundantly (10:10).

## Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!

## Reflection Questions on John 5:1-9

1. Why do you think Jesus chose to heal this man out of all those who were gathered in the five porticoes around the pool of Bethzatha? Was it just because of his age and the length of his illness, which is pretty much the only detail we are given about this man? Do you suppose that there might have been others who had also been coming to the pool for years? Or perhaps the choice was completely random? Regardless, how do you feel about the healing of one man among so many others needy? What does this leave you thinking and feeling about Jesus?
2. As noted in the commentary above, the material that follows these verses could well influence how we might interpret today's scripture, as it is in these verses that we realize the man who was healed by Jesus was accosted by the religious authorities for carrying his mat, that he didn't know who it was that healed him at first, and that when he did learn his healer's identity, he threw Jesus "under the bus" almost immediately. And more! So, given all this relevant context, why do you think the lectionary cuts the reading off at verse 9?
3. "Take up your mat and walk." It is a well-known and memorable phrase conveying Jesus' healing power. But have you ever wondered why Jesus was insistent that the man take his mat? He could just have easily have said, "leave your mat and walk." And as noted in v. 10, it was the act of carrying his mat that created the controversy with the religious authorities. So was Jesus intentionally pushing buttons here, either for the man or for the authorities? Was it a coincidence? A form of protest? An act of public witness? What do you think?

**What questions do you have?**

**What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?**