

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 9 MAY 2010

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John 5: 1-9

“Suffering and God’s New Possibilities”

1. A man defined by his suffering

Our bible story in John 5: 1-9 is relevant to our life today. It relates the story about a man who suffers alone, for a great length of time, with no one to support him. No friends, or family! In one way, suffering is always experienced alone! Yet, as our story reminds us, new life can always arise in suffering, and part of this is that we are no longer alone.

We are still in the season of Easter. Easter is about the emergence of new life out of all levels of suffering and even death. New life is always beckoning us at all levels of life, particularly when we experience illness and health issues.

In our story in John 5: 1-9 this man has been ill for thirty-eight years. Is he really interested in being healed, as he seems to have given up hope? You can hear it in his voice when he says to Jesus: “no one is there to put me into the pool; someone steps in ahead of me”!

Resignation, powerless, self-defeating! He lacks a self! Or rather, he has created an identity out of his situation: “I am a no one, a victim of neglect!” He not only suffers from his illness, but he also suffers from not being connected to others. And, he may not really want to change! To be connected to others! At an unconscious level, he may have grown to be happy in his unhappiness! He may enjoy telling his story and gaining attention.

I saw this in many people when I worked in a home for homeless people in the inner city of Sydney! There were 90 people who lived there and hundreds who came to the day-centre for food and company. You saw the way their various illnesses and health complaints defined and narrowed their sense of self and of life! One of the key ministers who came to speak to them at the main Christmas luncheon reinforced their identity of poverty and suffering by telling success stories about those who had succeeded and left the streets!

2. Healing is the restoration of personal identity and social relationships

Malina and Rohrbaugh in their *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*,^[1] who study the culture of ancient Mediterranean society, inform us that illness was understood differently from our modern, biomedical view. For us it is about disease, the malfunction of an organism, “that can be remedied, assuming cause and cure are known”^[2].

For this ancient society, it is interpreted as illness, “a disvalued state of being in which a person's social networks have been disrupted and social significance lost.”^[3] So the main challenge of suffering is being cut off from their connections to others. Healing, therefore, is about restoration! So when Jesus invites this man to stand up (resurrection), take up his mat and walk, he does so at once!

But restoration involves renewal of personal and social identity. Yet, restoration usually requires the blessing and permission of existing systems and structures.

In the verses that follow our story, the religious authorities challenge this man when he is cured: “It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat!” And of course, the implication is that you can’t be healed on the Sabbath either, unless it is a matter of extreme urgency!

John tells us that the religious authorities decide to persecute Jesus for this act, and to kill him, both for breaking the Sabbath and for making himself equal to God in his statements to them.

3. Dealing creatively with suffering

Before we consider this issue, let’s pause to reflect on how suffering disempowers us at many levels.

Suffering can forge and shape a sense of small, powerless self. The pain, the loneliness, and the challenges can be so overwhelming, that we can over-identify with them. We begin to believe these things define who we are! This man seems deeply structured by his suffering and experience. Even after his healing he is still unaware of who it was that empowered him. He did not see Jesus! As a beggar, which he would have been, he did not call upon him for assistance or healing. It is as if he is resigned and embedded in his condition!

This aspect of the text offers us creative insights for our own suffering today. It also encourages us to reflect on creative ways of restoring health at many levels, even as the sufferer or in a family where someone suffers.

When we experience **personal suffering**, do we allow the suffering such power that it creates and shapes our identity: evolving a small, powerless, suffering self?

When **as a family** we watch someone in our family suffer, deal with illness or aging, our language and the way we treat them can create an identity for them and ourselves. What kind of identity do we wish to create?

In our text, Jesus **sees** the person who is suffering. He sees a person, not a suffering! He **speaks about** the condition of suffering in an open, empowering and courageous way! To be silent, is to communicate something. To seek to be too kind is to express anxiety, for ourselves and the other.

Being seen, being heard, being listened to sensitively, all this provides comfort and strength. Sometimes we avoid such connection: because suffering raises our anxiety of suffering; because we are unsure of ourselves; because we do not realise what to say! All we need to do is to be present and non-reactive, encouraging mutuality, and avoiding condescension and too much pity. Reality is the way to go about connection. This requires a strong sense of awareness about our own self.

When the man is healed and then faces indirect criticism from religious leaders, Jesus follows him up and has further empowering dialogue with him.

In all this, the way Jesus sees and takes time to communicate and contribute to his healing, all this reminds us that God is deeply interested and concerned for the sufferer. Yet, the concern of God, as the concern of Jesus, was the full restoration of this person to life: to deal with whatever destroys one and keeps them from full health: of their body, their spirit, their identity, their family and their community. The word for “heal” in the Greek here refers to “being whole, of being right with the

world".^[4] This is what resurrection life is about in our life today! Life is never without suffering, but it is about how we live creatively, courageously, and faithfully and hope-filled with suffering.

4. Jesus presents a God of open, inclusive systems

A final issue emerges from our text. How do we understand this conflict between the Jewish leaders in our story and Jesus? What I mean is, what do we make of Jesus' challenge to the existing religious systems and structures of his times, to the way the Sabbath was interpreted? What is he actually challenging here?

In my interpretation, Jesus was not denying their right to the observance of the Sabbath, or their way of worshipping and believing in God. That would be to create an exclusive system. What he taught and practised was that God was concerned for human beings first, and that religious systems and practises must serve the people. Jesus also taught the intimate closeness of God's presence within life, for all people, in grace, love and justice! And such an understanding reminds us that we must always ensure that systems and structures are in constant transformation to express or mediate this God into all of life.

Gail O'Day puts it this way:

The "Jews" focus on the challenge to the conventional order, whereas the healed man and Jesus focus on the new possibilities, the man's new life.

... The contemporary reader is thus invited by this text to examine when and by whom in contemporary church life the knowledge of God brought by Jesus is rejected because it is too challenging to existing religious systems and structures.

This is a delicate interpretive situation, because to engage in a battle of conflicting orthodoxies by pitting one "right" understanding of the good news against another is in reality a rejection of Jesus. Much damage and hurt have been done in the church by laity and clergy alike in the defense of the "right" position...

Jesus brings God into human experience in ways that transcend and transform human definitions and categories. ^[5]

Brian Stoffregen puts it even more bluntly:

When do the structures and rules of the Church help to keep people "sick" or "stuck in their condition" rather than offering new life through the power of God?^[6]

^[1] Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 113f.

^[2] *Ibid.*

^[3] *Ibid.*

^[4] Brian Stoffregen, Easter 6, 2010, John 5: 1-9. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john5x1.htm>

^[5] Gail O'Day, *John, The Interpreter's Bible*, 581,

[6] Brian Stoffregen, *Op Cit*.