

Sermon for Sunday, February 8, 2026

John 5:1-18

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Martin Luther wrote extensively about the concept of "law and gospel." Seminary students are taught to use this lens when studying Scripture and shaping a sermon. In a nutshell, Luther taught that the law convicts and the gospel saves. By extension then, a Lutheran preacher should utilize the law to convict the listener and then salve their anguish with a good dose of gospel. Today we will consider how this Scripture reading convicts, how the gospel/good news saves, and how the conviction and salvation speak to us here and now.

We all recognize that today's Scripture reading is a story of a miraculous healing. We affirm that Jesus, as God's son has the power to heal—even a man who has been an invalid for 38 years. We often take these precepts for granted. As we read this lesson we aren't necessarily concerned with the miraculous healing or Jesus' identity because, as life long Christians, we have heard these stories and precepts many times. The verse that grabs our attention and gives us pause is the one in which Jesus says, "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." Wait, what? Why does Jesus say this to this man? And by extension, what does it mean for us?

The gospel of John defines sin as "separation from God." During the 38 years that the former invalid lay by the pool he would not have been allowed to enter the Temple to worship. I recognize that he couldn't walk, but even if he could, as a physically unhealthy person he would not have been allowed to enter the Temple precincts. From a religious point of view he hadn't worshipped God for a long, long time. He was mired in sin because he was separated from God. That's the law speaking.

When Jesus finds him later, he is found *in the Temple*. We assume he was participating in the rites necessary to fulfill the Jewish religious laws: like "show yourself to the priests" or bring a sacrifice of thanksgiving for your healing." He was worshipping and therefore, no longer separated from God.

Here are some details about this story to notice:

1. The man never asks Jesus for healing. Perhaps the man doesn't realize that Jesus has the power to heal. But when Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed, the man explains that he has a lack: he has no one to help to get into the pool when the waters are "troubled." He never actually "makes the ask" of Jesus.
2. Here's how the Lutheran perspective on law comes in: This story points to a major failure of the society surrounding the man. Surely other people at the pool had been there a long time. But no one said, I will set aside my desire/my need so that he who has been here far longer than I might be healed. I'll trust that I'll get my turn another time. Human ego is always about self and making sure that the self gets what it wants and needs first. Human ego also assumes that there's only so much healing to go around and if I don't grab this opportunity, I'll never get another chance. This is sometimes called "zero-sum."
3. Now the gospel good news is that Jesus intervenes in the invalid's plight. Notice again, that Jesus heals a man who never specifically asked him for help. Notice also that Jesus doesn't heal the man by assisting him into the pool. Jesus doesn't utilize the healing pool, the system that exists right in front of him. Jesus uses his power as God's son to heal this man. Why this man and not any of the multitude lying there? We are not told.
4. Thanks to Jesus the invalid is able to give up his mat. Like the woman at the well, he is able to walk away from his previous identity as an invalid into a new identity. Jesus is the one who makes this new identity possible. That's good news.
5. At the conclusion of the story we have no idea if the invalid becomes a disciple/follower of Jesus. We aren't told if he "believes in Jesus as the Son of God." There is a healing story immediately before this one in which a royal official begs Jesus to heal his son. Jesus does so—remotely and it is reported that the father and his entire household believed. Jesus gained followers as a result of that healing but nothing is recorded about this one. The broader point is that we really don't know why Jesus healed the man at the pool.

Now there's a darker side to this story and it occurs when the religious authorities show up and catch the man carrying his mat. That's when we learn that he's doing it on the Sabbath! Instead of rejoicing that the man is healed, they chide him for breaking a Sabbath law! There is so much irony in this response. Assuming

that the religious authorities spend time in this area, it appears that they have no understanding of this man's history. The authorities care only about the fact that the man broke Sabbath law. This type of response can be transferred to us and our world: how often do we point at the breaking of a law rather than rejoicing in the healing of a human who has suffered for 38 years!

Jesus' act of healing on the Sabbath, combined with his claim that since his Father is working on the Sabbath, he can too is what brings him to the attention of the religious authorities. Essentially Jesus is claiming that he is God's son. It is this claim that convinces the religious authorities that Jesus must be destroyed. Jesus' claim that he is God's Son occurs for the first time in this passage. Whether Jesus' words were intended to rile up the religious authorities, or not, ultimately that's what happened.

We all recognize that today's Scripture reading is a story of a miraculous healing. And we affirm that Jesus, as God's son has the power to heal—even a man who has been an invalid for 38 years. But the Scripture doesn't just apply to this poor man 2000 years ago; we believe that the Bible is God's word and that it was written to speak to us.

So what should we followers of Jesus take away from today's Scripture lesson?

1. No one spoke up on behalf of the invalid. No one suggested that he should be given priority since he had been lying there for 38 years. No one advocated for him. And isn't that common in today's world? Sometimes people say, "After me, you come first!" Usually they say it as a joke, but there's a hidden glorification and prioritization of self that occurs when these words are spoken. A "me first" attitude that ignores the needs of the other person.
2. One corollary is that this story epitomizes the idea that the world is a zero-sum game. This is the idea that there is a finite amount of resources and that if you don't grab them and hoard them for yourself, someone else will and you will end up without. A few months ago we heard the story of God feeding the Israelites manna in the wilderness. If we learn anything from that story, it is that God faithfully provides and there is ALWAYS enough. Zero-sum is a human concept and a selfish one at that. God doesn't act that way. There is always enough and more than enough. There is no zero-sum with God.
3. Returning to my premise of silence and lack of advocacy—I remind you that Jesus taught that Matthew 25:40 And the king

will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. And a few verses later, Matthew 25:45 "Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did NOT do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' As followers of Jesus we are called to action; called to advocate, called to say, "He gets to go first." called to lend a hand and assist someone into the healing waters, called to feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, clothe those with a lack, and visit the sick and those in prison. That's advocating friends.

4. Another item to take away from today's Scripture lesson has to do with the religious leaders—with those in power—who are blinded by their adherence to the law so much that they cannot see the power of God at work right in front of them. Is it possible that the same is true for us? That we are so blinded by what WE think is important to God, that we cannot see God at work right in front of us? Two prophets have answers for that:
5. Amos 5:21-24 "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." God cares far more about justice and righteousness, then God cares about correct worship.
6. A second prophet records in Micah 6:6-8 "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" 8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Once again, God cares far more about justice, kindness, and humility than God cares about strict adherence to sacrificial forms of worship. What would be the just response to an invalid who has waited for 38 years for healing? To advocate for him and ask others to wait. What would be the kind response to the invalid who has waited for 38 years for healing? To assist him into the pool. That my friends would be walking humbly with your God.

So what then shall we do? From Proverbs 3:27 Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.

And from John Wesley: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

The law reminds us of our failures as humans to act with justice and kindness. The law demonstrates our failures as humans to act in a righteous way toward our fellow human beings. The gospel shows us a different path: a path where we pay attention to the needs of the people around us and act with justice and kindness toward all humanity.

Let us pray: Good and gracious God, we ask for your spirit to move within us so that we might recognize the needs around us and step forward in faith toward actions of justice, mercy, and kindness. Help us in our deep need. Amen.