

“Ready for Change?”

Among the best of newspaper cartoons has been Calvin and Hobbes. “One day Calvin and Hobbes come marching into the living room early one morning. His mother is seated there in her favorite chair. She is sipping her morning coffee. She looks up at young Calvin. She is amused and amazed at how he is dressed. Calvin’s head is encased in a large space helmet. A cape is draped around his neck, across his shoulders, down his back and dragging on the floor. One hand is holding a flashlight and the other a baseball bat.

‘What’s up today?’ asks his mom.

‘Nothing, so far,’ answers Calvin.

‘So far?’ she questions.

‘Well, you never know,’ Calvin says, ‘Something could happen today.’

Then Calvin marches off, ‘And if anything does, by golly, I’m going to be ready for it!’

Calvin’s mom looks out at the reading audience and she says, ‘I need a suit like that!’” (As reported in “The Peace of Christ in a World of Chaos” found at sermons.com)

Certainly, Calvin was very leery of what might change! In that cartoon episode, Calvin thought his clothing choices and equipment – flashlight and baseball bat made him ready to deal with any such threat. **Part of what makes that Calvin and Hobbes cartoon humorous is the fact we human beings tend to be fearful of change and, as with any fear, we tend to either prepare for battle – to fight or we try to avoid it – deny it is happening – become allied with the status quo – dive into fantasy – choose flight from reality.**

That brings us to the dynamics presented in our Gospel Lectionary Reading. Jesus has entered Jerusalem for a religious festival and passes through a very special setting. The location was the Bethzatha pool with five porches near the Sheep Gate. As Jesus entered the vicinity of this unique pool and porches, he came across a man, who had been sick for thirty-eight years. This man’s health had remained bad during the previous thirty-eight years. From the context of the Reading, the sick man frequently came to this pool to seek a miraculous healing during all those years of his illness. The man, evidently, believed the claim that an angel of God periodically stirred up the waters of the pool and when that happened, the first sick person who got into the pool was healed. The sick man came to this pool almost every day with the hope he would one day be the first into the pool when the angel stirred up the water.

Jesus, evidently, knew all of those aspects of the sick man’s history. The Scripture states in **verse 6**, *“Jesus saw him lying there, and he knew that the man had been sick for such a long time; so he asked him, ‘Do you want to get well?’* The man’s life had been so focused on laying near the pool that he did not experience much of anything else. He was even unaware of Jesus’ identity!

Why did Jesus ask him that question? It was evident the sick man wanted to be healed. That was why he came every day to the pool! Let me suggest, Jesus forced the man to face the need for a major change in his life. In our vernacular, Jesus challenged the man – **“Ready for Change?”** The man was a prisoner to his routine – his status quo! He had become resigned to his fate of his continuing illness. He got himself to the pool but did not arrange for someone to get him into the pool when the water was stirred! Another indication of his resignation – his flight from reality was his non-answer to Jesus’ question. He did not answer Jesus but explained, instead, he was still sick after thirty-eight years because there was no one to get him into the pool before someone else got in! If the man had really been ready for a change in his health, he would have answered Jesus with an enthusiastic, “Yes!”

The man’s failure to appropriately respond to Jesus’ question did not deter Jesus from proceeding to heal the man! **In verses 8 and 9**, *“Jesus said to him, ‘Get up, pick up your mat, and walk.’ Immediately the man got well; he picked up his mat and started walking. The day this happened was a Sabbath”*. Ready or not, the man was healed!

Remember I mentioned earlier the man was so tuned out on public events that he did not even know who Jesus was? Well, after Jesus healed him, he did not even ask Jesus or anyone else about the name of his healer! So, when the Jewish religious authorities – the Pharisees, Teachers of the Law, and the Priests saw the man carrying his mat, they went ballistic and accused him of working on the Sabbath. He explained he was carrying the mat because his healer had told him to do so. They demanded the name of his healer and he confessed he didn't know it!

In verse 14 of chapter 5, John reported, “Afterward, Jesus found him in the Temple and said, ‘Listen, you are well now; so stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.’” Frankly, that warning sounds much more like what the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law would say, so what was going on? The basic difficulty here is the translators for our pew Bibles, like most translators, translated one of the Greek words used in the verse as “sinning” but the Greek term actually means **“missing the mark”!** The former sick man missed the mark during and after his healing. He had not answered Jesus' question about whether or not he wanted to be healed. The man did not inquire into Jesus' name or identity after he healed him. Amazingly, he blamed his healer when the Legalists sought to judge him. All of those are examples of how the man missed the mark! So, after Jesus gave him the warning, what did the healed man do? He set out to miss the mark again – he went to the Jewish authorities and told them Jesus' name, so they would go after the healer instead! In a way, the healed man was a precursor for the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot.

The Gospel of John reports in **verses 15-16, “Then the man left and told the Jewish authorities that it was Jesus who had healed him. So they began to persecute Jesus, because he had done this healing on a Sabbath.”** The authorities included the Priests, the Teachers of the Law, and the Pharisees. They saw Jesus' violation of their view of the Sabbath as a reason to get rid of him – to arrange his death. Jesus' going against their rules about the Sabbath worried the religious elite because they believed he would undermine their authority, position, and power. Jesus challenged their claim that God's Love and Forgiveness had to be earned through radical obedience to all of the Legalists' commandments along with the making of animal sacrifices and financial gifts. Instead, Jesus revealed God's Love and Forgiveness is given to us even though we do not deserve it – it is God's Grace! God wants us to experience a radical change in our lives and relationships for our benefit. **Jesus not only instructed us on how to live these changed lives, he also lived the New Life in Christ – the life of agape love, forgiveness, healing, welcome, and extravagant hospitality!** Jesus calls us to not just be “Ready for Change” but to allow God's Agape Love to change us – to transform us – so we live out the New Life in Christ. We do that as a way of loving Jesus and our Divine Parent – as an important extension of God Still Working in human history. Jesus understood our welfare and that of all people is more important to our Creator than some blind and ridged obedience to the Law and the Legalists' interpretations of it.

So, it is not surprising that in **verse 17 “Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is always working, and I too must work.’”** Based on this verse, our Personal Dedication Program's Theme is **“God Still Works!”** Today marks the start of this year's Personal Dedication Program. Beginning today, we will have a Personal Dedication Testimony during each of our Sunday Worship Celebrations through May 15th. On Personal Dedication Sunday, May 22nd, we will go through the Personal Dedication Process through which we will complete our Personal Dedication Booklets and bring them forward to the Altar to be Dedicated to our Divine Parent as our response to our call to use our Time, Talents or Skills, and Energy for God's Purposes in our New Life in Christ. **God Still Works!** God works through our faithful response to our calling to change the way we live our lives from seeking only our self-interest to manifesting God's Agape Love, Forgiveness, Healing, Welcome, and Extravagant Hospitality toward all people.

As Jesus asked the man, who had been ill for thirty-eight years, **“Do you want to get well?”** So, our Lord and Savior, in essence, asks us **“Ready for Change?”** **Let us show through our New Lives in Christ that we are living the change God sent Jesus into the world to reveal to us! On Personal Dedication Sunday, May 22nd, let us demonstrate “God Still Works!”** through our commitments to share more of our Time, Talents, and Energy as agents of God's Work. Amen.