

The Opposite

In the 90s sitcom Seinfeld, we meet one of the all-time great comedic characters, George Costanza. He is the anxious, insecure, and lazy friend of the main character Jerry and he's always saying and doing the the wrong thing.

He pushes over children and an old woman to escape a kitchen fire.
He insincerely converts to another religion to date a woman.
He pretends to be disabled just to gain access to the nicest restroom at his office.

It's one catastrophe after another until one day George realizes that every decision he has ever made has been wrong, His life is the complete opposite of what he wanted it to be. Every instinct he's ever had has been all wrong. So with the encouragement of his friends, he decides to do the opposite.

Right away, he orders chicken salad on rye instead of tuna on toast.
Instead of being intimidated in social situations, he walks up to a beautiful woman and says, "My name is George, I'm unemployed, and I live with my parents."
The woman not only falls for him, she gets him an interview with the NY Yankees.
In the interview George describes every job he's ever been fired from and then criticizes the team owner George Steinbrenner to his face.
They hire him immediately.

Now, you may wonder what this character from a comedy show has to do with today's Gospel. With no disrespect to the sick man in this story, he reminds me a bit of George.

This man has gathered with other invalids near the Sheep Gate beside the pool of Beth-Zatha. Like the others, he waits in the shade of the five porticos until the water in the pool is stirred up, which is the moment they all rush to get into the pool. It is reputed to heal those who get in first after the water is stirred up. We don't know a lot about the pool and its healing powers. Perhaps there were healing minerals in the water. Perhaps it was just a legend. We don't know.

What we do know, what the man says, is that he never in 38 years makes it to the water. He's been doing the same thing for 38 years and it never goes right for him.

Thirty-eight years of waiting under the porticos in the heat and cold, rain and drought.
Thirty-eight years of being sick and sitting with all the other infirm people hoping to be made well. Thirty-eight years of being walked over by others who, perhaps, did get the healing he so longed for.

Along comes a stranger who asks him, "Do you want to be made well?"

What an impertinent question. Why else would he go there every day? Why else would he endure the indignity of waiting and struggling and watching people step over him?

He doesn't even answer the question, he just explains to the stranger why he hasn't been healed.

And then the stranger tells him to do the opposite of what he's been doing for 38 years. "Stand up, take your mat, and walk."

And he does. We have no indication that he knows that the stranger is Jesus. He was healed, picked up his mat, and began to walk. That's it.

The man in this story reminds me of myself sometimes. And a lot like people I know. Especially lately. He's stuck. He's stuck in a pattern that he thinks will help him but it never does. He is living out that old adage that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Or like the saying that some of my friends in 12-step programs offer: nothing changes if nothing changes. Like George Costanza the sick man at the pool might have started to doubt his instincts and his choices. But does he know how to do otherwise? Where would he even start?

This poor man is gathered with other suffering people to compete for limited healing resources. It's like a precursor to our 21st century battles over access to masks, vaccines, and tests. It's reminiscent of stories we hear about families having to jump through hoops to get food and shelter, or even get insurance they've paid for to actually cover health care costs. It's like having to explain (when you shouldn't have to) that mental illness is an illness.

All these suffering people are huddled in the shade waiting for the small window of opportunity that they might beat all the other suffering people into the pool of Beth-Zatha.

And for one of them healing came, but not in the way he expected or had spent 38 years pursuing. For this one man, the answer was to do the opposite of what he had been doing most of his life: Stand up and walk. He wasn't told that his faith had healed him. He doesn't even know who Jesus is, the one who told him to stand! Just do the opposite of what you have been doing. Stand up and walk.

Importantly, the story doesn't make any judgment about those who were not healed that day. Jesus doesn't blame them for not standing up and walking. He doesn't say that going to the pool for healing is bad. What he does is notice one sick person and offer him a way out.

There is something both frustrating and hopeful about this story. The frustrating part is that not everyone is healed. There are so many by the pool who need it, Jesus only approaches this one man. Don't they all deserve to be healed? Is God playing favorites here? I'm sure this question is not limited to the story of this one man. In my own life I've questioned the fairness of my own suffering when others are lifted out of their depression, broken heartedness, anxiety, or financial worries. Why them and why not me? Why others and not my hurting friends and family?

Maybe Jesus didn't heal him - after all he didn't even touch him or pray for him. All he did was tell him to stand and walk. Maybe all Jesus did here was point out that maybe, just maybe, healing was already there.

There is also hope in this story. This one man IS healed. And while he has no idea who the stranger was who asked him to stand, has no idea he has encountered the Messiah, we know that the living God went right up to this man in his suffering and noticed him. Noticed him and showed him a way out of suffering. There is something reassuring in the fact that at this busy entrance to the Temple during a festival, Jesus' attention was drawn to those gathered by the pool desperate for healing. With all that is going on around him that is where his gaze landed. And on this one long-suffering man in particular. If it is true in this one case, it can equally be true in many other cases - indeed in our own lives - that Jesus notices and cares about the circumstances of our lives.

Faced with the frustration that not everyone in this story was healed and the hope that Jesus specifically noticed one person's sickness and pointed the way to healing, we might wonder what this means for us. It might be worth considering, if you need healing, whether Jesus is inviting you to look around and see a different way. Perhaps even the opposite of what you have been doing. What are the barriers you face to alleviating physical, emotional, and spiritual sickness? Perhaps doing the opposite is not the solution for everyone, but for some of us, it is!

And in any case, while Jesus asks this one man to reframe his options from the pool to getting up and walking, Jesus presents to all of us a reframing of how salvation itself comes to us. After all, until Jesus came on the scene, most people expected a Messiah who was a political and military powerhouse who would alleviate the suffering caused by Empire. But the actual Messiah was a carpenter's son from the sticks who asked, "do you want to be healed?" (Salvation means healing, after all.) If you want healing, try looking in a different direction. Try looking for someone poor and powerless in the ways of Empire, look instead for someone strong in the ways of love.

One of the things we learn over and over in our Christian faith is that God comes to us in unexpected ways. And God also comes to us in the context of our everyday lives. Unexpected, yet familiar.

Sometimes even when we think we are focused on leading a faithful life, Jesus will tap us on the shoulder and ask, "Do you want to be healed?" And it will sound like an impertinent question because why else would we be doing what we are doing?! So we'll explain to Jesus that we have spent years trying to get healing and it just isn't working. And he'll say "Healing is already here. I'll point the way for you"

Amen