

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 22, 2022**

**“I Have No One”
John 5:1-9**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

In 2010, there was an article in *The Presbyterian Record* magazine, written by a minister of our denomination, describing a conversation he once had with a young man whose life was changed by the story we just heard from John's Gospel—a young man who, in reading this same story, felt that God called him to find ways to help others. Here's part of that article: “Do you think that God might be speaking to me?” he asked. This young man was new to the Presbyterian Church and to Christian faith, and so had the audacity to wonder about such things. [...] He'd been reading John chapter 5—the story of a man [...] lying by a pool hoping for healing [...]. [T]he young man [...] said, ‘I was wondering whether these words were for me? Maybe God wants me to be someone who helps people who have no one else to help them?’ [...] ‘Do you think it's God speaking to me through the Bible?’ he asked.” Later in the article, the minister reflected on that encounter, writing: “I really do think God spoke by means of scripture to the young man who entered my office that day” (Topping).

I think that's a powerful way to hear our Gospel Lesson—so keep that article in mind as we explore this story, which begins as Jesus comes across a multitude of people with disabilities or illnesses lying by a pool. This pool was apparently thought to have had healing properties: it seems “[t]he waters in the pool would bubble up periodically” (Wright), and people believed healing would come to the very first person to enter after that (cf. v. 4, AV). So this promise of healing had drawn a crowd—who waited beside the water, hoping to be the first one in.

And amid all this need, we hear about one person desperate for healing. John writes: “One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’” (vv. 5-6). And the man's response is key to understanding everything he's facing. John writes this: “The sick man answered him, ‘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’” (v. 7).

“*Sir, I have no one*”: the man is alone! He has no advocate, no helper, no defender—so every time he tries to get into the waters of this pool, someone who's stronger than him takes advantage of his weakness and knocks him back down. He wants to get better—he desperately wants to get better—but the illness he wants to overcome is the very thing that's holding him back. Can you see the cycle here? He's been weakened and wants to be strengthened, but when he tries—someone blocks him and stops him, and it's a cycle of suffering that won't end until somebody steps in and lends him a hand.

And that's precisely what happens: John tells us, “Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk” (vv. 8-9). Sometimes the Gospel accounts present Jesus healing with a touch, but here John describes

Jesus healing with a word. Jesus commands, and it happens: he says ‘stand,’ and the man is enabled to stand; he says ‘walk,’ and the man is enabled to walk. *And this cycle of suffering is broken.*

For me, this story has a particular resonance, because of its place in my own life and journey of faith. When I was in the last year of my undergrad at McGill, I thought I had my future fairly well mapped out—and Christian ministry was very much not part of any such planning. But one day I bumped into a friend on campus who told me that a group of students were going to be volunteering at a women’s crisis centre, to help with sorting and folding clothing donations for the women and children living there; she invited me, and I agreed to join them.

That evening, when we had finished sorting the donations, we went downstairs to see if there was anything more we could do. And that’s how I ended up in the kitchen, serving food to the residents—and it was then that a distraught woman came up to the counter. She didn’t just want a meal; she clearly wanted someone to talk to—and right away she started sharing everything that she was going through. I’ve never been able to piece together quite what she said that night; she was in such an anxious state, it all poured out in a confusion of details. But I do know that she was facing a big decision, far more than felt she could handle; it involved lawyers and police and a decision about criminal charges; she had this critical decision to make, but she felt overwhelmed; it was clear that she really needed someone to talk to, to help her sort it all out.

And at that moment, I really felt I should help somehow; but then one of the staff members cut her off midsentence, and said gruffly, “Well, good luck with that; now keep the line moving”—and he sent her along. As she rushed away, I was upset by what I’d just seen, and I felt like I should be helping—but I also realized that I wasn’t in any position to help: I was just some student volunteer, not a staff member, and I had no authority or training or qualification to offer her the guidance and advice she needed. And that night, as I walked home through downtown Montreal, I felt like something just wasn’t right; I felt that I was somehow in the wrong place.

At the same time, I was just coming to Christian faith; this all took place before I was baptized; and when I got back to my apartment, I opened up my Bible to a random page in the New Testament, and that was the very first time in my life that I came across John, Chapter 5, our Gospel Lesson this morning. I read it, and I was stunned at how it spoke to me: I was already feeling like I should be somehow in a position to help a person like that distraught woman who really needed to talk to someone—and then I read this passage about a sick man who wanted to get out of his circumstances but couldn’t do it alone. I remember thinking how that sick man by the pool would’ve been stuck there for years more if it hadn’t been for Jesus helping him and interrupting that cycle of suffering. And I wondered: in my own way, could I somehow be the kind of person who does something similar for people—maybe someone that people could talk to when they need a listening ear.

And so, the trajectory of my life changed. All my other career plans—I felt done with all that—and I knew that, somehow, I needed to find a way to help people who needed a helping hand, to help people who needed someone else to come alongside and make a difference. I had no idea where this would lead. For a while, I thought about going to law school and pursuing not-

for-profit law; I thought about different professions. But I was also getting more involved in church, so I figured I should talk about it with my minister.

“I was wondering whether these words were for me?” I asked him. “Maybe God wants me to be someone who helps people who have no one else to help them?” At the time, I didn’t think the conversation had made much of an impression on him, but then—some years later—he wrote an article about it for *The Presbyterian Record*. That “young man” in the article was, of course, me—fresh from this life-changing experience of seeing my world through the lens of that story. In the weeks and months and years that followed, that initial sense of call—that sense that I needed to help—it led eventually, through various developments and changes, to pastoral ministry and military chaplaincy and theological education (and, well, who knows what next).

You can imagine why—with that kind of a background—I find our Gospel Lesson particularly powerful. My experience at that women’s crisis centre, seen through the lens of this story from John’s Gospel, challenged me in ways that ultimately redirected the trajectory of my life; I wouldn’t be here otherwise. And I think if we each listen to this story carefully, and look at our world through the lens of this text—I think we may each hear a Word of challenge for our own lives. Jesus drew near to someone who had no one, who needed the helping hand of one who could come alongside; is there a new way that—in your relationships, in your work, in your community—that you too could come alongside those who feel they have no one?