

John 5 & 6
The Gospel of John

July 17, 2016
Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens with Jesus back in Jerusalem to celebrate "...a festival of the Jews." Which festival this was is not mentioned. According to John, this would have been Jesus' second visit to the holy city and perhaps marks the second year of his ministry.

The scene is the pool of Bethesda. As John points out, there were many disabled persons gathered there. The reason for this is that there was a tradition according to which an angel would periodically descend into the pool, stirring up the water. The first person able to enter the pool at this time would be healed.

Jesus engages in conversation with a man who is said to have been ill for thirty-eight years. The question? "Do you want to be made well?" The man's dilemma is that he can never reach the water in time. Given the fact that he has been trying to take advantage of the healing power of this pool for so long, Jesus obviously concludes that he does indeed desire to be made well. So he tells him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." And that's exactly what he does. This is the third sign Jesus performs in John's narrative.

There is a pattern John observes in these "sign" stories. First, Jesus performs the sign. Dialogue follows with the healed person and those who witness the sign, after which Jesus explains the sign. However, before getting to these specifics, it would be important to say something about what Jesus means by "being made well."

Jesus does not ask the man if he wants to be healed because he's not sure about that. He asks because an affirmative answer would indicate that the person had faith in Jesus' divine power and presence. Only God can heal in this way. Everyone knows that. So, if the man were to have said, "Yes," this would be a sign of his faith that God was present in Jesus Christ.

Why is this important? Because, for Jesus, being made well was much more than physical healing. Human beings are more than their bodies. When we are not well, we also need spiritual healing, and spiritual healing happens through faith in God's presence. Only God's presence in our lives through faith in Jesus Christ can effect spiritual wellbeing. Spiritual dis-ease is manifest in chronic fear, anxiety, and the potential for despair. These are not mere psychological problems. They are signs and symptoms of the fact that the human condition is inherently vulnerable, insecure, subject to threats of all kinds, and mortal. Were we "like God" as the tempter in Genesis promised, there would be no need for divine protection from threats to our security and wellbeing. Moreover, no matter how much we may try, we cannot eliminate our vulnerability to death and despair. Only the assurance of

God's presence in our lives makes for a sense of spiritual wellbeing and wholeness. When Jesus heals a person physically, he is also desirous of healing them spiritually. This takes faith on their part. And so he asks, "Do you want to be made well?"

This man's answer suggests that he missed the point, or rather, that his faith was in the pool. For when Jesus asks if he wants to be made well, the man speaks of his difficulty in accessing the water. Later in the story, his lack of faith and the consequence resulting from not being made well spiritually is evident in his willingness to turn on Jesus by identifying him to the authorities. Had he been made well in the sense that Jesus meant, he would have been grateful. This was the opposite. And the consequence of his actions is reported in verse 16. "Therefore, the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath."

The controversy regarding the Sabbath was centered on the issue of what it meant to abstain from work of any kind. Since carrying a mat fell into the category of work, the man had technically violated the Sabbath rule. However, there was one exception to this that was widely accepted by many teachers of the law. Should the law of love for neighbor come in conflict with the rule of abstaining from any kind of work, showing love was considered a valid exception. Jesus argues this point on several occasions when he had healed someone on the Sabbath. Nevertheless, his detractors remained steadfast in their opposition, and this became one of the very serious problems that people in authority had with Jesus. John points this out in verse 18 of Chapter 5.

The rest of Chapter 5 consists of Jesus' explanation of who he is and why he does what he does. As the Son of God, he has been given the authority to execute God's will. Being one with the Father, everything he does is directed by the Father. He does nothing on his own. Moreover, the life that God has is also in the Son. He [the Son] receives nothing from human beings. Everything comes from God, including his ability to give eternal life to others. Because his opponents derive their authority from Moses, they do not have the love of God in them. Also, because Moses was the lawgiver, their accuser is Moses, not Jesus. All of this is offered so that they may understand Jesus' ministry.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 opens with Jesus back in Galilee. How, John does not say. A large crowd was following him around. Clearly these people were looking for a leader they could believe in—someone sent to them by God. While many may have been motivated by a desire to receive or see one of Jesus' signs, nevertheless, this is more than a group looking for healings. Jesus at times described his people as "sheep without a shepherd." This did not speak well of their current leadership.

In any case, because these people had wandered off from their homes, they were in need of a source of food. Jesus sees in this an opportunity to perform a sign that would possibly have a major spiritual impact on their lives. And, by the way, this particular sign, the feeding of the masses, is the only sign recorded in John that is also recorded in all the synoptic gospels. However, there are some differences in John's version.

Jesus begins by asking Philip how they are going to feed all these people. As John points out, this is a test. He wants to know if his disciple has the faith to figure out the solution in advance. He doesn't. However, Jesus knows what he is going to do. The implication, of course, is that the action he takes is God's will for him.

While much of the story is in keeping with the version we have from the synoptics, there is one important way in which it is different. In John's version, it is Jesus himself who passes out the food. That the people receive it directly from Jesus suggests that he wants them to understand something about himself. However, after feeding everyone with a few loaves and fishes, John, like the synoptic gospels, observes that twelve baskets of food were left over—twelve being the number of tribes that constitute the people of God.

After witnessing this, the people conclude that Jesus is the promised Messiah. And, being convinced of that, they want to make him their king. This is a classic case of not understanding the role of their Messiah.

The Son of God did not come to bring the people a new and glorious earthly kingdom. He did not come to rule according to any law, or to give them the impression that the Kingdom of God was like other kingdoms. The rule of law had already been given through Moses. Moreover, the kingdom was not meant just for them. It would be a universal kingdom that would include all the peoples of the earth.

What Jesus came to bring was the rule of God. This rule would come into being through his ministry of reconciliation between God and a people who, though they needed God in order to become who they were meant to be, at present lived in alienation from God, separated from Him by sin and rebellion. This is why the human condition was in such disarray. Evil, suffering, fear, despair, war, and death—all of these things are signs and symptoms of the absence of God in our lives. Jesus, as the One in whom God became present for us, came to reconcile us to God, to bring the Spirit of God's love into our hearts, and thereby restore us as children of God who will be no longer bent on our own destruction.

Through his ministry of reconciliation, Jesus would make the spirit of God's love available for us again. As the atonement for sin, he would be the One through whom the Spirit of God's love would come to us, bringing God's rule into our hearts. God's rule in our hearts is experienced as love, forgiveness and new life. It establishes a whole new order from the ground up. While the law might curb sinful behavior, it

cannot change the heart, and it cannot give life. The rule of God—the Kingdom of God—does both. And so, when they make an attempt to turn him into their king, he retreats “to the mountain by himself.” (vs. 15) That is, he sets himself apart to commune with God, his Father.

Later, Jesus again joins his disciples on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But the crowds follow. This being the case, it is time for Jesus to explain this sign. What follows is a long dialogue where Jesus once again uses the sign—in this case, bread—as a symbol for himself and what he can do for them.

At first, Jesus confronts them with an accusation. They are not seeking him because they believed through the sign but because they want more of what he can give, namely, bread. What Jesus is suggesting here is that human beings seek God, not because they see in God the “pearl of great price,” but because they want God to give them the good things of this world. Jesus’ mission was to give the people God. Only God’s love in their hearts can provide them with the joy, the security, the fulfillment they seek. Only the spirit of God’s love can quench their hunger and spiritual dis-ease. But they are still stuck on the notion that more and more of the good things of this world will bring them what they hunger for and see, will still the conflicts in their hearts, and will provide them with joy and peace and life. This is where he is going with this dialogue. He is trying to redirect their search from the goals of the world to God Himself.

This, he goes on, is what he can provide for them. Were he to succumb to their desire for “more bread,” he would at the same time deprive them of what they truly need and what he truly came to give. He further explains this by pointing out that what they seek is only temporary. It perishes. It’s here today and gone tomorrow. “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal, which the Son of Man will give you.” For this reason, he refers to himself in this way: “I am the bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” That is to say, only God can quench the thirst in our hearts. Only he can still the restlessness and fill the void.

But how does this happen? How do we receive God into our hearts so that he actually becomes our “treasure?” In other words, what work do we have to accomplish in order to come into the union with God that our hearts long for and desire? “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (vs. 29) Faith in Jesus Christ brings the life of God into our hearts because it is in Jesus Christ that heaven came to earth.

And so, eternal life, joy, hope, peace—all the spiritual virtues by which we are made spiritually whole and healthy—these are not a reward for anything we do, nor are they wages for services performed. They are a gift from a God who desires to give them to us. In order to receive this gift, we need to stop striving for the things that perish—the good things of this world. The old self that is so attached to earthly blessings that it cannot even “see” God due to the fact that God is out of its field of

vision, must be overcome. Our hearts need to turn to God as God is made available to us in the Spirit. This is what is involved in the development of faith, and this is why it can be so hard at times. We have a tendency to cling to the old out of fear and insecurity. But when we do that, we can't even know that God is an option for us. We live in denial, meaning we can't see what we don't want to see. But the gift of the Spirit of God changes that. This is what Jesus means when he says that no one can come to him unless it is granted by the Father. (vs. 65)

Thus endeth Chapter 6.