

Come on, man! Get up! Quit with the excuses already! Here this guy has the privilege of having Jesus standing and talking to him and all he can do is complain. But in a way, I understand that guy by the pool of Beth-zatha by the Sheep Gate. Once you have been sick for a long time, it sure is hard to even imagine getting better. He may just not have known what to say to the man who could look into his soul and ask him the most direct question he'd ever been asked.

We have two people in our readings this morning who couldn't be more different. This man at the pool by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, and the woman named Lydia in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. They both have something to teach us about our lives in faith.

Now, Lydia, in our first reading presents a model for us of wholeness, and health. We are told that she was a successful businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth who has the wherewithal to invite Paul and Silas to stay with her. She must have also been a woman of means because when she was baptized, she had her whole household baptized as was the custom then. This, in a day and age when women were still considered possessions of their fathers or husbands. She was a worshipper of God. She had faith. She listened. And because of these things the Lord was able to open her heart to hear what Paul was saying about Jesus and the Good News.

I will digress for just a moment to say that although for most of my life the term "Good News" was somewhat incomprehensible, our collect this morning gives us another word to use – the Promises. So we can say of Lydia that when Paul spoke to her she understood God's promises of life, forgiveness, healing and reconciliation.

Now at the other end of the spectrum is our poor guy at the healing pool. He has said that he cannot even get himself up to get into the pool. He is probably a poor beggar with no family,

no resources, no faith and could not really even hear Jesus properly. If he had heard Jesus he wouldn't have given Jesus excuses when asked, "Do you want to be made well?" If he could hear and understand who was standing in front of him he would have said, Yes, I want to be made well. Instead in his misery all he can do is recite his list of resentments. Ah, sounds all too familiar to me.

I can identify with the guy by the pool because:

1 he could understand that he was in a bad place, but he felt trapped by his illness and his lack of vision of anything better.

2 I sense that his excuses were a way of covering up that he did not want to ask for help. He probably never asked anyone to put him in the pool. And he didn't ask Jesus for help either.

3 I feel that he was someone who had given up. God's promises mean nothing to you if you don't think that they aren't meant for you. God's promises are about hope. We need help with our hope sometimes. We need someone to hope for us even when we don't have hope ourselves.

Imagine if Jesus stood in front of you and asked you directly, "Do you want to be well?" Now that is the question isn't it? That question cuts through all the baloney, and hits you where you stand.

Let me tell you where I stood a number of years ago, about 14 years ago to be exact. It's not a nice place. I've been with you now for a little over 6 months now and so, during this Easter season of resurrection, I want to tell you about my alcoholism and my recovery. I have no drunk-a-log full of exciting adventures. I am just a garden variety alcoholic with a predictable story. But it is my story.

As a wife, mother and full time manager of our computer business back in the mid 1980s I began to feel over my head and I couldn't cope. Philip and I started a computer business back just before the IBM PC had been introduced. Some of you may remember that we had a store in Sharon. We also opened one in New Milford and in Torrington. Of course we had our four beautiful boys too. I hated that I had to work full time in the business, and leave my sons home with an assortment of helpers, or no helper, much more than I wanted too.

I felt trapped though, because the business wasn't making enough money for us to hire someone to do my job at the store in Torrington. As I thought about having to go home and deal with the dinner and the kids and their homework each night after a long day of work that I felt overwhelmed. I also found that if I had a drink as I was driving home that I could face the boys and all their homework, and all their problems and dinner and laundry and bills and housework. I needed something to take the edge off.

The problem was that I kept needing more and more to take the edge off. After a few years of drinking, more and more as time went on, I realized that I was spending an awful lot of time drinking, and thinking about drinking. Did I have enough in the house to get through the weekend. Was I able to maintain well enough so that no one could tell? Was I hiding my empty bottles so they wouldn't be found? And was I going to enough different liquor stores so that I wasn't seen in any one store too much? In other words, my life revolved around having enough alcohol. After years of this I started to realize that I needed to change.

I began to pray fervently for God to take away this obsession I had to drink. "Please God, I don't want to drink anymore. Please help me." But, I was still full of excuses like the man at the pool at the Sheep Gate. "I can't possibly tell anyone about this. I never considered going to speak to my priest, or anyone else for that matter, about my problem.

If I didn't feel like I could talk to the priest, then why did I not seek out someone else. The problem was, I wanted God to help me solve this problem quietly, without having to get any

people involved. If I had asked ANYONE for help I am sure they would have eagerly responded. I just felt unable to do that. I wanted to keep it private. I didn't want to admit this glaring imperfection I struggled with.

So, I felt like the man at the pool: trapped, unable to ask for help, and without hope – I could not see God's promises in my life.

Eventually, with prodding from my husband and my father, I admitted my drinking problem to my doctor, who told me I should try AA meetings. When I walked into my first AA meeting in the basement of the St. Bridget's Church in Cornwall in October of 1995, I was very scared and very shaky. Two wonderful women spotted me right away and made me feel welcome, and began to explain the program to me. I learned about the steps, and having a sponsor, going to 90 meetings in 90 days, and taking things one day at a time.

It took a while to learn these things. In the beginning of my recovery I was disillusioned with my church and with God too. Where was God when I was praying to have my obsession lifted? I tearfully told all this to Carol, one of my AA friends, early in recovery. I told her that I didn't think that God cared about me. I said,

“You know, I prayed and prayed to God, and God never answered my prayers. I had to come here to AA to get sober.” What are you talking about,” she said. “Here you are.” And so began my resurrection. She spoke Christ's words to me. “Wake up! She was saying, “God's promises are already coming true.” But I had to open my eyes, and open my heart like Lydia did in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. I started that day to try to see what Carol was saying. I took the suggestions that are made in AA and I kept reading the promises in the Big Book and I began to get some hope.

I had a spiritual awakening as a result of following the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and I continue to go to meetings to this day. I don't ever want to go back to that place where I felt so trapped and hopeless.

Now here's the wonderful thing about my story, Lydia's story and the story of man at the healing pool. It didn't matter what our situation was, bad, very bad, or in Lydia's case very good. We learned that we can't pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Jesus just pulls us up and out no matter where we are and shows us a new health-filled and promise-filled life.

Lydia knew a good thing when she saw it. She was clearly a well-balanced, godly woman. That's what I would like to be when I grow up. I hope that I will be able to recognize a holy person right off the bat when they are put in my pathway.

We have to let God do God's work. Our work and our job is to take in God's Word which gives us hope, and take in the sacrament which fills us with grace so that we can take up our mats and walk.