

September 19, 2010
John 5:1-9a
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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*Telling Our Stories:
Transformation*

This week I saw the new movie, “Get Low,” with Robert Duvall. It’s a movie about a man’s story and his struggle to tell it. The main character, Felix, wants to have a funeral party before he dies. He says he wants to invite “everyone who has a story about me.” Quickly we sense those stories will be difficult ones. Similar to the lame man by the pool in today’s gospel reading, Felix has been living a “crippled” life for forty years, following a troubled and troubling experience, in which he holds some responsibility. He’s a gun toting, “No trespassing on my land” kind of guy, living in limbo on his secluded homestead. In fact, he is a tormented man seeking healing. It turns out what he really wants at the funeral party is a chance to tell his story. Being able to tell our story is often begins the transformation of healing.

Today I want to take the time to listen carefully to the story of the lame man at the pool of Beth-zatha.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha...

In Aramaic, the ordinary language of the people, Beth-zatha means house of grace, for it was believed to be a place of healing. Yet, in the name itself, there is tension lurking in the shadows - for the

name also had intimations of a dual meaning of grace and disgrace. (In the closely related Syriac branch of this language.) The ‘grace’ illustrates the healing, but the ‘disgrace’ alludes to all those invalids who congregate and even live there, desperately hoping for healing. In a time and culture where physical disability was understood to be a result of sin, all those unhealed people waiting day after day, week after week, year after year, were very unsettling. It was good for tourism, especially at festival time. You would think the authorities could clean up the streets.

In these alcoves lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed.

Some of us know what it is to be physically blind, lame and paralyzed. However, some of the rest of us may already be resting a little easier, thinking this story isn’t about us. Jesus isn’t going to be talking to us. We’re not blind, lame, or paralyzed. Really?

Do we not know what it is to be blind to our own faults? Are we not blind sometimes to the needs that are right around us?

Are we not lame with excuses about why we do not live by the priorities we proclaim? Are we not lame, limping from the wounds our souls have known?

Are we not paralyzed - by fear? Are we not paralyzed at times by the seven last words of the church? "But we've always done it that way."

None of us may hide. Christ comes to each of us and engages our story – our blindness, our lameness, our paralysis - even if it's not visible to others.

One man was there who had been ill, (lying on his mat) for thirty-eight years.

Thirty-eight years. Not thirty-eight minutes. Not thirty-eight weeks or even months, but thirty-eight years.

When you lie on your mat day after day you become acquainted with its every fiber and groove. It bears the indentations of your body and you bear the marks of its structure. You and your mat become one.

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, Jesus said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

Who wouldn't? The hope of a different future is palpable in Jesus' question. No more lying on a mat. No more begging for food. No more disgusted looks from passers-by. No more.

Yet, this man has tunnel vision when it comes to healing. He knows of only one possibility, which he has been pursuing for thirty-eight years, without success.

Tradition had it that when the water in the pool was stirred, in what was probably a spring, that it was being stirred by an angel. Whoever stepped first into the water after the stirring would be healed. This man never made

it first to the pool, Apparently he was not only an invalid but also poor, unable to hire someone to assist him quickly to the pool when the water was stirred.

The man doesn't answer Jesus' question directly. He looks not to the future, but to the past. He tells his story. He tells his mat story.**

The sick man answered Jesus, "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."

For this man there is no open future. There is only his mat story. He is literally and figuratively stuck on his mat. He has been confined so long that the mat has come to define him, even in the face of a new possibility for healing.

What are our mat stories? What stories have so come to define our sense of ourselves that these mat stories have come to define us, even in the face of surprising and healing possibilities?

Jesus said to the man, "Stand up, pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

The transformation began as the man told his story, with all its pain and poignancy. The transformation began as Jesus listened deeply to all that was said and all that was left unsaid. In that eternal now, the past and the future met. The man was transformed and he took steps into a new life.

Jesus doesn't tell him to leave his mat behind. Jesus tells him to pick it up and walk. The mat continues to be part of

his story and will go with him. Someday it may help him to be a wounded healer himself. It is just no longer the center of his story. It no longer holds him back.

We all have our mat stories – some we have told and some have not yet found voice. We have our individual stories, our family stories and our congregational stories.

When I came to First Parish one of the mat stories I heard some of us say about ourselves is that First Parish folk find it easier to write checks than to provide service directly to those who are in need.

First of all, I want to say that we are grateful for your financial generosity. Secondly, I have learned that that statement is not really true. Part of the dilemma is that we don't know each other's stories well enough to know all the ways and places that those sitting right beside us are involved in face-to-face outreach in the community. I've also learned that sometimes we don't ask directly or clearly enough for your 'in person' help.

I want to tell you about something new and very exciting that is developing in the congregation, about some church folk who are doing face to face outreach with those who come to the church office asking for financial assistance. This group is called the Local Benevolence Team, or as they affectionately call themselves sometimes, "Jane's Team," in honor of Jane Newhall, who died last year. Jane was the person who had been doing this ministry.

Last fall and winter Ed Bradley, on behalf of the Church Council and staff,

worked with Jane to learn about this ministry and to help us consider the possibilities for the future. He also talked with people at other churches in the area to learn what they were doing. Ed was intrigued by the people he met at the Bath UCC church who work in teams to provide this kind of ministry in their church.

We weren't sure if we could take a similar approach here. With a leap of faith, at a congregational meeting, Ed told us their story and asked if there were others who would like to join him in doing this ministry here. You answered the call. At last count, I think there are 14 or 15 people who have stepped forward. They are taking turns, working as teams, on a weekly basis to meet with people who come to the church seeking financial assistance.

It is not easy. The group meets regularly and ponders:

- How hard it is to say no.
- What if you think you are being conned?
- How to be well informed about other resources in the area.
- The question of how often to provide emergency aid to people.
- How best to serve people who are stuck on mat stories?

It is a transformation of outreach ministry beyond what I have ever seen before. It is a ministry that is transforming all of us as well. Please keep in your prayers all those who are serving and those being served.



** The idea of "mat" stories comes from Larry Peers of the Alban Institute.