

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
May 26, 2019

At the Wednesday evening Eucharist last week, our Campus Minister Matt Phillips gave a good homily that has been rolling around in my head for a few days. Weekday Eucharists often follow the commemoration of a saint or other holy person in the Christian tradition, and last Wednesday, the holy people in question were Nicolaus Copernicus and Johannes Kepler. The textbooks tell us that these two great minds were largely responsible for moving our entire species from believing that the sun revolved around the earth to knowing that the earth revolves around the sun. It's probably hard to underestimate their contributions to scientific understanding and human flourishing.

Matt used his sermon to talk about the historically fraught relationship between science and religion, and he suggested that science could be a catalyst for a more fulsome, robust, understanding of God and the creation.

I was thinking about this relationship between science and religion when I read today's Gospel. A man has been sitting at a pool famed to have healing properties for thirty-eight years. He has had no one to bring him down to the water's edge, and others in better shape have been cutting the line to get into the water. He's stranded and stuck. Jesus arrives on the scene, singles out this man, heals him, and then departs.

Our science has gotten a lot better. I imagine that the health outcomes down at Columbia St. Mary's are much better than the health outcomes at a magic pool two thousand years ago in Jerusalem. And, if given the choice, you can bet your bottom dollar that I'm going to go with the MRI machine before I try the holy jacuzzi.

But Jesus is never simply about a cure. Jesus is always about healing. And this is an important distinction. Earlier in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." Abundant life — the feast, the community, the prayer, the justice, the love — abundant life is what Jesus is offering to give this man.

It's easy to think of these miracle healings as soft or gentle acts — indeed they're often depicted that way in art — but real healing, holistic healing can be rocky. Our science is better, but have we solved the mystery of abundant life? We know that the sun is the center of our galaxy, but has that knowledge alone made us love our neighbor as ourselves? If an isolated elder gets her diabetes properly regulated, she has received her cure. But has she received her healing? Has she been woven into a community that tries to live as if God is among us? That kind of abundant life is hard to get down at the CVS. Jesus recognized the limitations of the magical pool. With massive respect to our medical colleagues, Jesus recognizes the limitation of the modern hospital. God craves an abundant life for you, in every possible way.

I'm guessing that you have experienced a time in your life, or perhaps have borne witness to a time in the life of a friend or loved one, that felt like sitting and waiting for healing for 38 years. I'm sure there have been times when it felt like others were getting to the water before you were. Or times when it felt like no one would help. Our best science can assist with some of that. But the power to be woven into the body of Christ comes from God. God is in the business of bringing you back to life.

Christian tradition teaches that what we can say about Jesus with confidence, we can say about God with confidence. And this story tells me that it is in the nature of God to search out the least, the last, the lost, and the left out. God is asking you, every week, "Do you want to be made well?" And be careful how you answer. 'Cause you might very well discover that to be made well, you have to live differently. Or you might discover that to be made well, you have to spend your money differently. Or you might discover that, after you are made well, you can't stay silent when friends or family make hurtful or ignorant remarks.

You know that slip of paper that you sign at the hospital that says you have been informed fully about what is about to happen? God has one too. God wants you to be healed but also wants you to know what you're getting into when you are woven fully into the Christian life.

I don't know what that healed man did with the rest of his life. The Scriptures don't tell us. But I like to think that he returned to that pool and started helping people to get into the water in a way that no one was willing to help him. I like to think that he brought a picnic basket — maybe loaves and fishes — down to the sick and the dying as a response to what Jesus had done for him. I like to think that he preached the same gospel of abundant life that he had experienced from Jesus. Sisters, brothers, and siblings: what are you going to do after you are made whole? The answer to that question changes everything.

I am so grateful to science for the means of a cure in so many cases, and I'm glad I don't have to wait for a healing spirit to come down into a pool while I lay there. But I am even more grateful to a God who seeks us out and offers us abundant life now and forever. Amen.