

That is Not What I Asked

By
The Reverend Andrew Greenhow
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Numbers 21:4-9

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom, but the people became discouraged on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, “Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten shall

look at it and live.” So Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it upon a pole, and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. 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?’ 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.’ 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.

One of my favorite stories from the early days of Broad Street Ministry, the wild and woolly faith community in Philadelphia I used to serve, took place on Christmas day. A group of people from a local synagogue volunteered to serve a meal that day along with our Director of Social Services, Edd, a Buddhist without anything better to do on Christmas morning.

One particular guest kept getting into fights, yelling, and causing scenes and the volunteers started to get overwhelmed. Edd walked over to this guest at her table and said, “How can I help you?”

With great ire, she took a deep breath and prepared to go on a long rant, “I am the baby Jesus!”

Edd interrupted: “Happy birthday!”

The temperature lowered for a moment and she smiled at him. Then, just as quickly as it was lowered, the temperature rose again and she glowered at all the people at her table and shouted, “None of these bleepity bleeps are bowing down and worshiping me!” She went on for a while about the bleepity bleeps and Edd listened. And at the end, Edd said, “Well I’m sorry to hear that, and I hope you have a good birthday, but I do need you to chill out.”

I love this story for lots of reasons – Edd is no longer with us – but in particular, I love it as a fable about the nature of human truth-telling. I

love the layers of concealment and disclosure. Edd initially asks a question that he doesn't really mean. He says, "How can I help you?" when in reality, what he means is, "How can I get you to behave differently?" And in responding to a disingenuous question, the guest gives a startling answer: I am the baby Jesus. It's not the answer to the question Edd asked, nor the question he meant to ask. Instead, it was a forthright disclosure that this guest was not doing well, that she was experiencing reality differently, and, most importantly, that she was feeling underappreciated, though of course none of that is what she says.

And then Edd, responding to something that he knows is not true - this person is not in fact the baby Jesus – accepts it as completely true and in so doing, meets the actual need. This guest needed to feel seen and celebrated on a lonely day.

There's a lot in this story, I think, that resonates with how we speak to one another. We ask questions we don't mean or that we already know the answer to. We give answers we think others want to hear or that we don't particularly mean. We place layers of misdirection and concealment over our communication. We tell old stories that have stopped being true. We communicate at multiple layers – with text and subtext, tone and form, and content.

We see that in our first text from Numbers, when the people ask Moses, Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? It's not a curious question, and it's not asked in good faith, but the people asking it are definitely telling the truth about how they feel!

This exchange between Jesus and the sick man at the pool of Beth-zatha in the gospel of John is another engaging study in human deceit, concealment, and disclosure. Jesus sees the man and asks, "Do you want to be made well?"

This is a simple yes-or-no question to which the answer must surely be, "Yes." But that is not what the man says. Instead, he complains that he is alone, that he has nobody to help him, and that these other bleepity bleeps keep butting in line in front of him.

Just like Edd speaking to the baby Jesus on Christmas morning, Jesus cuts through what's not important and gets down to the true thing: Stand up. Take your mat. Walk.

This story falls into the category of Jesus' miraculous healings, and that holds an appeal. But for me, the real miracle of this story is that Jesus' divine power is greater than that of human intransigence and complaint! Jesus is greater than our infirmities, but more startlingly, his love is greater than our whining about the bad behavior of other people. He is greater than our capacity to make excuses and to complain!

Because let's face it, this guy couldn't have been very good company. He doesn't listen to the question Jesus asks, and he just repeats a story that he tells every time. This is a tiresome refrain, and I'm sure it has contributed to a vicious cycle around the pool of Beth-zatha: he complains because nobody helps, and nobody helps because he complains. He is the person who puts on their turn signal to say I'd like to come into your lane so you slow down to let them in and they won't come over and they won't come over so finally you speed up and say, "I'm done with you; find your own way over!" Or is that just me?

I'm sure we all have these people in our lives. People wedded to tired old refrains. People committed to imagined limitations and imposed scarcity. People who keep their expectations of others so low so they won't be disappointed, and yet they always find a way.

Yes, the question Jesus asks the man by the pool is uncomfortably pointed at us more than we would like. A simple yes or no question, "Do we want to be made well?" Or would we prefer our old stories, would we rather cling to our intransigence, would we rather huddle around the dying embers of our complaints?

Luckily for the Israelites wandering the desert, luckily for us, and luckily for the man by the pool, God looks past our unpleasantness. God exorcises our demons of complaint. God overcomes our commitment to scarcity.

God sees this man by the pool for who he is: scared, lonely, vulnerable, hurting, grieving, dreaming that someday, something could be different for him. And luckily, that hasn't changed in 2000 years: God moves beyond our unpleasantness to look upon and love our fear, loneliness, vulnerability, pain, grief, and dreams that things could be different for us.

Of course, the implications of this are really quite staggering. To be regarded for who we really are, to be looked upon as not merely the old stories we tell about ourselves, to be loved as God loves us is to learn a deeply unsettling truth: just like the man by the pool of Beth-zatha, just like the Israelites with the bronze serpent they can look to for healing, in God, we have everything we need for a life of discipleship and faithfulness.

Like the man by the pool, we are not in need of other people to get out of the way. We are not held back from faithfulness by some bleepity-bleeps butting in front of us in line. There is much in the news, in our jobs, in our schools, in our relationships, and in our lives that wants us to believe we lack the tools necessary for a life of faithfulness. We could be really generous if only we had another million dollars or so. We could be a scholarship athlete if only we put in a few more reps. We could get a more prestigious college acceptance with just one more tutor. We could get the promotion, we could get the beach house, and on and on it goes.

And when we feel this scarcity in our own lives – when we refuse to believe that we have what we need for our own faithfulness – we impose that scarcity onto others. If I don't have enough, then you sure won't either. To be the man who believes others butt in front of him in line at the pool is to eventually be the people who butt in front of the man at the pool.

But here is God saying, "Did you hear me? I asked if you want to be made well." It is God saying, "You have what you need. You do not need others to get out of the way. You do not need to get in the way of others." In God, we have everything we need for our own healing and faithfulness.

I want to be clear about what I'm saying here: I am saying on this national holiday weekend that we do not need the trappings of a liberal democracy for God to see and love us for who we really are. The present curdling of our national myths does not mean that we are forsaken by the living God, which is to say we have everything we need to be faithful, which is to say we are still on the hook for a life of discipleship with our present circumstances as they are. It means that as things change around us, we must fend off the sense of scarcity, and guard against the scarcity we will impose on others.

Or here, in this very church. Pastoral transitions can cause anxiety or fear. And it is precisely in those times of anxiety and fear that God sees us and

loves us for who we are. Which is to say, we have everything we need for a life of communal discipleship throughout the transition.

I have a three-legged pit bull named Melody, and I remember the first time she barked. An ambulance was going by outside, and she was per usual, fast asleep. From sleep, she howled at the ambulance, woke herself up with the howling, and then looked at me and Karen with what appeared to be genuine sheepishness. Like she was really embarrassed for being so mouthy, and for years, that was the only time she had ever barked.

She is now at least 15 years old. She is unable to walk. She is experiencing considerable cognitive decline, growling at people she once greeted with great affection. And she spends a lot of her life barking. She barks when I leave the room for 10 seconds, she barks at 3 am, she barks if I'm standing near her, talking to somebody, and not petting her. She does a lot of barking. And I'm not proud to say I've gotten pretty frustrated, angry, and conflicted about what to do and how best to care for her.

Her barking, like so much communication, like the woman who thought she was the baby Jesus on Christmas or the man by the pool of Beth-zatha, has layers of concealment and disclosure, text and subtext. She cannot speak English; she can only bark, so I work my way through the checklist: Is she cold? Is she thirsty? Does she need to go out? Is she uncomfortable? Does she need company, or is she just being a jerk? But what I have found

in all cases is that when I am at my best, I am able to hear what she's really saying: She's saying I am struggling. I need help. Can you please help me? And the best thing to do is respond with gentleness.

Isn't it amazing that the utterly peerless God of the universe, the wholly unknowable one, stoops down and moves among us, responding to our incessant barking with gentleness. Hears us in our distress. Loves us for who we really are. Challenges our assertions of scarcity. Reminds us we have everything we need for healing and faithfulness. Calls us to a life of discipleship.

Do you want to be well? No matter how embittered, anxious, spiteful, troubled, agonized, grief-stricken, put upon you are, you are in the hands of the living God, which is enough. Stand up. Take your mat. And walk.

Amen.