

Take your bed and go!

Sermon on 19th Sunday after Trinity John 5, 1-16

1 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. **2** Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. **3** Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. **5** One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. **6** When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” **7** “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” **8** Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” **9** At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, **10** and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.” **11** But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” **12** So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?” **13** The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. **14** Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” **15** The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well. **16** So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.



Everyone wants to be well. Everyone wishes for a good life, good health, family happiness, and success. However, many people fall by the wayside on this search for happiness and a fulfilling life. Dreams are shattered; people become ill, and some lose hope. In today's Gospel, we hear of someone who had tremendous suffering but did not lose hope. He was ill for 38 years. And had no one to help him. He lay in the house of mercy and yet found no mercy. What hardship is presented to us in these short sentences! A person who hoped where there was no hope. We must understand that life expectancy at that time was not even 38 years. And yet, after 38 years, this person did not stop hoping. We also know places today where people hope seemingly without reason. There are many pilgrimage sites, and some report miraculous healings in such places, so that others also go there. The Jamkaran Mosque in Qom, Iran, is one of the largest pilgrimage sites for Shia Muslims. It is believed there that the 12th Imam, the Mahdi, lives in obscurity. The location of his hidden abode is even well known. It is a well in Qom. Thousands of people go there every day. They throw small letters or prayers into

the well, presenting their needs to the 12th Imam. But the well in Qom remains a black hole with no answers and no bottom. We in Europe are also familiar with these houses of mercy, which are not truly merciful but merely cruel deception. In Europe, happiness, beauty, and health have become the highest priority. One could even say that it has become the modern religion. What won't we do to become or stay healthy? The house of mercy is now a gym or a cooking class for healthy food. We strive day in and day out... We search for hours for the best food or the best pills that promise a long and healthy life. Or even extend life a little. And yet we don't get our due. At least not permanently. The paralyzed man in the House of Mercy near Jerusalem had no one to help him. The people who look into the black hole in Qom find no one in the darkness there either. The same can be said in Europe today: There are many people who are rich and healthy, but who no longer enjoy life. Yes, people remain hungry and thirsty. Back then, the paralyzed man watched the water in the pond for 38 years. Could the happy day still come? Could I still be healed?

And in this situation, the Lord over life and death, and the Lord over health and sickness, entered the scene. It is the same Lord who alone not only promises happiness and salvation, but is also the embodiment of all those things in person. It is the Lord who embodies heaven in his person. The heaven that we no longer have to earn through him, but receive as a gift. And this Lord did not attend the great gatherings in Jerusalem, but went where the most miserable were. The paralyzed man in the House of Mercy was finally to receive mercy. He was to know what mercy is by getting to know the Lord of Mercy personally. And this Lord Jesus asked the paralyzed man a question: "Do you want to be healed?" Now, one could say that this question is a given. Of course he wanted to be healed. Why else would he have sat there for so long by the Pool of Bethesda? Jesus' question is not without reason. The sick man is included in his healing. Jesus does not heal him against his will. He wants the sick person to know who healed him and why. I am certain that Jesus asks this question from all of us: "Do you want to be healed? Everything you have in life and all the strength you use for your happiness and for your life are right and good...but do you want to be healed? Even from your deepest needs, which can only be healed by Jesus? It is important that we hear this question. For the barriers between the Lord of Creation, Jesus, and us are great. For the people of that time and for us, these barriers are great for different reasons. For the people of that time, the problem was that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. For us, the problem is that we cannot believe that Jesus healed at all. The people of that time did not doubt that Jesus healed. Not even his opponents. Their problem was not that Jesus apparently broke the laws of natural forces. Their problem was rather that he revealed who he was by also being Lord of the Sabbath. It is not without reason that Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath. For the Jews, it was clear from the very beginning that only God himself could break the Sabbath commandment. We moderns have a different problem than those of old. We have a problem with healing itself, which, interestingly enough, no one, not even Jesus' opponents, doubted back then. We oppose Jesus in a different way. By

failing to recognize his miracles, we fail to recognize that Jesus is the Son of God, Lord over life and death, and thus also Lord over the forces of nature. Jesus wants to reveal who he is to us and to his contemporaries. By saying, "Take up your bed and walk!" he does just that. Interestingly, the sick man said nothing in response to Jesus. He didn't say, "Hey, can't you see that I'm paralyzed!" nor did he say, "Don't you know there's a death penalty for walking down the street on the Sabbath carrying a bed!" No, this sick man recognizes who Jesus is. And obeys him because he understands. And he went and was healed. What a sight that must have been! On the Sabbath, of all days. On the holy Sabbath, and on a holy festival no less, someone walks nonchalantly through the streets carrying a bed! This is either a blatant mockery of God's law or a confession.

Of course, this had consequences. The healed man is brought to the temple and interrogated. He is asked to explain what all this is about and why he did it. And the sick man can do nothing other than what every Christian should do: point to Jesus. "The one who healed me said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk!'" This testimony of the healed man should be the testimony of every Christian. We don't need to know many scholarly books to be a testimony to Jesus. We only need to point to Jesus and what he told us. The sick man certainly knew almost nothing about the Gospel. Except that he had gotten to know Jesus and his power. He told him, "Get up!" And he did. And he was set free.

Jesus challenges us today as well. Jesus stood before the paralytic in the House of Mercy and said, "Get up! Take up your bed and walk!" Jesus also says to us today: Take the mattress of your self-pity, take your unbelief, your forgetfulness of God, and take your laziness under your arm. And go! Go to the place where help is available and where healing is possible. There are countless reasons to despair of life and our world. There are countless reasons that paralyze us on our mattresses of hopelessness. And Jesus stands before us in the midst of this despair. Jesus stands before us in our lives full of illness and powerlessness. He doesn't want us to stay here alone. Even when we have struggled to the breaking point trying to achieve health and happiness. Jesus stands before us and asks: "Do you want to be healed?" And he doesn't just challenge us. He gives us the word that sets our joints and feet in motion. "Get up! Take your bed and walk!" The paralytic in the House of Mercy did just that. By doing so, he obeyed the Lord of the universe, who is even greater than the Sabbath. The mattresses of worries and troubles are large and heavy. Jesus is greater! And we can confess together with the healed man against all the attacks of Satan and the world: "The one who healed me told me that I am his child, that I may walk, that I may be with him forever." He told the paralytic, "Take up your bed and walk." He tells us today that we, who are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, are children of God. If he says so, then I may be just that!. No matter what else contradicts it. But it shouldn't stop there. The paralytic at that time heard Jesus' words, took his bed, and walked. But his life with Jesus was still to continue. Jesus didn't leave him alone. He searched for him. And he finally found him in the temple. Jesus wasn't finished with him yet. He wanted to talk to him one more time. He wanted to give this man more than just physical health. Jesus

made a new beginning with him. "Sin no more," he told him, "...so that nothing worse may happen to you." The illness this man had to endure for 38 years was only one side of the coin. There is indeed something worse. There is eternal separation from God. That is the greatest illness there can be... spiritual death... eternal damnation. And then Jesus speaks the word that points to the future: "Sin no more!" These words apply to us too. We are imprisoned in our bodies. We will surely die soon. We will surely even be plagued by sin again and again. But now we must follow Jesus and remain in him. That is the goal before us. Therefore, take up your bed and go! Amen.