

“The Gospel for the Long View”  
Acts 16:9-15; John 5:1-15  
Easter 6 C  
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In the gospel of John, neither Jesus nor his message is overwhelming. Not all those who come in contact with him follow him. Early on John puts it, “He came to his own people and they received him not.” There is much decision, indecision, and rejection in John. It has to do with recognizing. Some recognized him for who he was, others not, and still others slide in and out of the story trying to figure him out.

The gospel of John presents what we might call stories of potential disciples.<sup>1</sup> Somehow their circumstance bumps them up against Jesus, sometimes cunningly, sometimes by accident. Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the man born blind are examples. Sometimes these characters just can’t see the implications of how all this is going to be unfolding over the years. When John’s gospel ends some are disciples, some not, and some just confused.

We meet today a paralyzed man languishing by the pool of water. He is an old man. Not many people reached that grizzled old age of 38.

Jesus approached this paralyzed old man with a ridiculous question. “Do you want to be made well?” How is he supposed to answer that? The man gets defensive. He offers an excuse: he can’t even get into the water when it is roiling and has the best opportunity for healing. Who *is* this guy, anyway?

It was obvious what he wanted, and apparently, through Jesus, he got it. An crazy conversation ends with healing. On the Sabbath, of all things. Later, when the ex-paralytic was quizzed about what happened, he could not even identify Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Here is one of those rare people who is in the right place at the right time, actually gets what he wants. Then there is this awkward silence. The man *gets what he wants, but misses what it means*. We never hear of him again in the gospel.<sup>3</sup>

In a strange way he reminds me of the healed leper that appears in the farcical movie *The Life of Brian*. The healed leper sits by the gate of the town oddly begging, “Alms for an ex-leper! Alms for an ex-leper!” He complains that business hasn’t been nearly as good

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<sup>1</sup> Mark F. Whitters, “Discipleship in John: Four Profiles,” *Word and World*, Volume XVII, 4 (Fall, 1998), 422-27.

<sup>2</sup> John 5:13.

<sup>3</sup> Whitters, 425-6.

since Jesus had healed him. To comic effect, he got what he wanted, but missed completely what it meant.

This healed paralytic is oddly like the prosperity gospel Christian who gets the piles and piles of money he has been earnestly praying for, and then forgets who it was that gave it to him, or what he could do with it. This healed paralytic wanders off out of John's gospel oblivious of the implications for the rest of his life. Miracle succeeds, discipleship fails. You get what you want, and miss what it means. What a curiously modern situation.

Compare him then to Lydia, that wealthy businesswoman from the book of Acts. Putting this kind of story into the Christian history is what gave Christians the radical reputation. The Christian church from the start welcomed women and promoted them as leaders and prophets.<sup>4</sup> Paul brings her nearer the gospel. By baptism she "converts." And immediately it occurs to her to say, "Come and stay at my house." "For Lydia a natural result of her and her household's receiving of the good news is to welcome these erstwhile strangers into her home."<sup>5</sup> The good news bumps into this woman -- on a Sabbath, but not in the synagogue -- and she receives it at face value. And her life changes. "A worshipper of God," she is now baptized, converted, and she becomes a disciple. And the barriers between men and women, Jewish and Gentile Christians melt away in her offer of hospitality.<sup>6</sup>

And somehow Lydia -- contrasted with the paralytic -- immediately puts together the implication. The beginning of a life of discipleship was standing right before her at the door. She does the next natural thing at hand. She invites them to stay at her house. A convert right now, a disciple for life.

With rare exceptions, some of the biggest moments in life, the most meaningful are lived without appreciation of their implications. Some we embrace, some we dread, and often, as with the healed paralytic implications escape us.

I think I was not unusual among people my age when, in 1970, Ruth and I got married. We were married five days after National Guardsmen killed four students at the Kent State protests on May 4, 1970. The political world -- whatever your allegiances or commitments at the time -- was in frothy roil.

There is plenty of evidence that I was not looking very far ahead in those days. There were plenty of implications that those older than I hoped I would calculate. I did not. Now, on the occasion of an anniversary 40 years later, it would be safe to say that the future with all of its implications has caught up with me. Implications of that wedding moment have spun themselves out in congregations, in children and grandchildren, in

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:2-16.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Barreto, "Acts 16:9-15: Commentary on the First Reading," [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>6</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation Series, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 138.

friendships nurtured over decades. Marriage is not the magic – or in my case, terror – of flowers, attendants, and thickly blurred promises. Marriage is living in the direct implications of that momentary conversation decade after decade after decade.

I think your discipleship is like that. You have now a life of discipleship standing right before you. The implications may not be immediately clear. Your life in God's promises lives out over decades of God's faithful shaping. And before you know it, from your perspective now you – one of Jesus' disciples -- might be able to discern how the past has worked itself into the present, and how the future stands before you today.

So the first thing is that getting what you want does not make for a Christian life. A disciple is not someone who gets what they want in life. The healed paralytic is the example of that. A disciple is something else. A disciple is one who, no matter the circumstances of their life, lets God mold her or his life to be Christ shaped.

The second thing is that it can take a whole lifetime to do that. “. . . [L]ife goes this way or life goes that way; . . . chance is always involved, and . . . living is usually just dealing with consequences. In one way or other, of course, . . . [life] is often about just that: sorting through consequences of the past impending on the present and setting into sometimes astonishing motion the future.”<sup>7</sup> The doubts and wonderings of the present are a part of your life of discipleship. And so is the “astonishing motion of the future” God has in mind for you.

Your baptism took but a moment to accomplish. As with Lydia, the rest of your life is discovering the implications of that very short splash of water together with God's promises. God's benefits and grace are not just for a short-term experience. God's promises are for the long haul. For it is only over the long haul that discipleship is lived. Sometimes it is over the long haul that discipleship is even recognized.

It takes a lifetime living in God's grace to discern the discipleship God has been about in you, the “Christ shape” God has been working in you. It takes a lifetime to trust the promise of God. And tomorrow we will face again, perhaps standing right before us, as John might put it, potential discipleship. You can count on that.

Not everyone who meets Jesus becomes a disciple. Some do. And over the long haul God molds some astonishing disciples. . . like you. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> The sentence is really written about fiction, but the language also lends itself to discipleship. Richard Ford, attributed in Melissa Byles “Richard Ford on Raymond Carver,” *The New Yorker*, October 5, 1998, <http://www.albany.edu/offcourse/nov98/fordoncarver.html>