



Standing in God's Way

1 Sam 8:1-9, 19-22; Ps 81:6-16; John 5:1-18; 2 Cor 4:7-5:1

He had lain there for thirty-eight years. That's a long time to sit around waiting on hope against hope for healing and a new lease on life. This man was older than Jesus. For longer than Jesus had been around, the man had been at the pool waiting. He had waited, lying at the edge of the pool for days, and weeks, and months, and years on end. He had dreamt of beginning life anew, likely only to receive healing after he became too old to do him any good. Yet he waited and waited some more.

The waters of this pool would occasionally be stirred, whether by some subtle tremor, the gurgling of a feeding spring, or the movement of wind on its surface. The people believed that when the water was stirred, it was by the activity of God or one of God's messengers. They saw God's presence, blowing on the water and would enter with the hope that God would heal them of their infirmities. This man had lain at the pool for thirty-eight years in hope that he might be one of the privileged to enjoy the blessing of God's healing.

Waiting had become a habit—a way of life. Despair had entrenched itself in the consistent denial of his healing, as others always got into the water first. He was focused on this means to gain healing. Even though he had been denied the opportunity time and again, he was dogged in his determination to gain healing from God through the troubled waters of this pool. He was so determined that this was the means of God's redemption, he missed God's presence in Jesus.

He was not the only one waiting at the pool. John tells us there were many others there, waiting, also. No doubt, others lay there as this man, day in and day out, anxious to receive the blessing of God's healing. Jesus singled this man out of the rest. He had been there the longest. He was determined. He had also lost hope. He was so focused on the pool as the means of God's blessing, he almost missed the healing God had in store.

Jesus asked him a simple question. "Do you want to be made whole?" He didn't know how to respond. The simple answer would have been, "Yes." That would have been a response with an open end, opening his life to whatever Jesus had in mind. It would have meant that the only thing that mattered was the healing. He was engrossed, however, in the pre-determined means of God's healing. He was too invested in this pool. If he were to be healed, it would mean enlisting the help of someone to wait with him and help him be the first to arrive in the water when they were next disturbed by God.

He didn't want to simply say "Yes." He had someone's attention and wanted to enlist their aid in fulfilling his dream. He was not really open to a different means of healing. He had invested far too many years at the edge of this pool to be ready to try something different. "Sir, how can I be healed? I don't have help to get in the pool quickly enough!" It was a plea for help. It was a request for a specific kind of help. He had decided how God would act. He was determined that this was the only way for God to act. His determination bordered on standing in God's way, refusing to allow God the freedom for creative redemption.

Jesus did not chide him or berate him. He did not criticize him for his lack of faith and understanding that God had more than one means of acting in redemption. He simply told him to take up his mattress and walk—to receive God's healing and act on it.

That is where the trouble began. Jesus did not play by the established rule book. He made things up as he went along. He acted as though he had the freedom to change the playbook midstream, to shake things up in the process of living. That didn't sit too well with the religious establishment. They were so determined about knowing God's will, they would not allow God to do any differently than the tried and true patterns of their tradition. Their traditions forced God into a tight little box of legalistic interpretation with no room for grace and the creativity of love.

Claiming to serve God and stand for God, they were standing in the way of God's redemption. It was not God for whom they stood. It was for their traditions, heritage, and human wisdom. They claimed to follow God, but failed to understand grace.

In Samuel's day, the people had tired of God's way of leading. They wanted to follow the wisdom of other nations in electing a king. They wanted someone visibly responsible to lead their battles and defend their borders and national interests. They were uncomfortable with God raising up a leader as the situation required. They wanted a defined authority. They did not trust God. They would rather trust a human authority figure and pay taxes than to live by faith. They would not hear the warnings of Samuel. They stood in God's way to demand God act according to their will and wisdom.

Paul recognized that God was not so limited to a humanly-devised power structure or narrowly defined means of action. He also understood that as Jesus had portrayed a freedom of action in grace and love for the sake of redemption, we too should live according to the same pattern of creative grace.

Grace calls for new expressions of redemption. Love calls for helping those lying at the pool's edge see new possibilities and opportunities for encountering God's grace and provision. Jesus' presence in our lives demands that we become vessels of God's redemption in new and uncharted waters—that we rely on the movement of God's Spirit within our hearts, not simply the established patterns we have come to rely upon.

Large institutions and well-funded structures of power need not rely on God to accomplish their goals. They can rely on the established wisdom and means of the world to accomplish their work. They may grind on with much waste and loss, yet continue due to great momentum. It is so easy to rely on the great public institutions to carry on the work of God. As Samuel's audience of long ago, it is so easy to submit our responsibility to another appointed to carry out the task at hand. In so doing, however, we counter the plan of God, standing to impede the movement of God's Spirit.

We are celebrating this personal initiative of grace, love, and faith this week. As we look to the ministry of Watering Malawi and the needs of people in Malawi for access to clean water, we focus on our own initiatives of grace. We focus on our individual responsibility to care for the needs of those sitting by the pool and waiting. We look to the creative response of God's grace to take us beyond the boundaries of our established patterns and institutional dependency to allow God to trouble the waters at our feet in new ways.

Are we ready to step out of a comfortable reliance on others to allow God to spread redemption through us? Jesus did not leave behind an institution or a program. He left disciples with a mission of redemption through love and grace. Are we ready to take up the task before us, standing in the way of God, or will we simply stand in God's way?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*