

The First Baptist Church, Midland
June 27, 2010
John 5:1-9

Finding Hope In Every Moment
A Sermon by the rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Hope

How do you tend to look at the world today? With the huge problems confronting the nations, do you ever worry? Or do you tend to be optimistic? For me, it's all about attitude. If I allow myself to focus upon the war in Afghanistan, the horrible ecological assault in the Gulf region, the instability and threat against the world's nations by rogue nations like North Korea and Iran, the volatility in the relationships between Israel and her neighbors, the instability of the worldwide economy and our own teetering unemployment realities, our inability within the political framework of our own country to not just talk but to listen to each other, I can become fairly pessimistic.

But I have to say that most of the time I feel pretty positive. That's probably why I really resonated with a recent article by New York Times columnist, David Brooks (April 8, 2010). It was an op-ed piece from early April entitled "Relax, We'll Be Fine". He started out by saying "This column is a great luscious orgy of optimism. Because the fact is, despite all the problems, America's future is exceedingly bright." He had my attention.

Now I can't take time to read the entire article, but listen to a few of the points made. Population is going to continue to grow but will be enterprising and relatively young. While we are currently facing a large uptick in the aging population, in the big picture we're going to grow younger. Extrapolating from current trends, it appears the future will be "an archipelago of vibrant suburban town centers, villages and urban cores."

"In addition," he says, "the U.S. remains a magnet for immigrants... (and) half of the world's skilled immigrants come to the U.S... Further, "The United States measures at the top or close to the top of nearly every global measure of economic competitiveness. A comprehensive 2008 Rand Corp. study found that the U.S. leads the world in scientific and technological development. The U.S. accounts for a third of the world's research-and-development spending." He goes on to say, "As the world gets richer, demand will rise for the sorts of products Americans are great at providing... As the rising generation leads an economic revival, it will also participate in a communal one. We are living in a global age of social entrepreneurship." Then to summarize, Brooks wrote: "In sum, the U.S. is on the verge of a demographic, economic and social revival, built on its historic strengths. The U.S. has always been good at disruptive change. It has always excelled at decentralized community-building... Surely a country with this much going for it is not going to wait around passively and let a rotten (I would have said dysfunctional) political culture drag it down."

I felt good when reading this editorial... even optimistic. And as I said, that's pretty easy for me because I'm typically that guy who says when passing each floor while falling from a

skyscraper, *so far, so good!* In fact, someone said to me not too long ago *John, you're like a teakettle... always ready to sing even though you're in hot water up to your nose!*

Maybe so. And I guess that's okay because I tend to see optimistic people as hopeful people who are usually pretty happy. But as I intimated at the beginning, even the optimists among us have those pessimistic days every once in awhile. And that's good, too, because we need balance in life, don't we. To be constantly optimistic would probably suggest there's a bit of naiveté in the air, just as being constantly pessimistic might suggest a touch of gloom. And I have a hunch the old boy we meet in today's story is a combination of both, meaning he has a realistic yet a hopeful way of looking at his world. Let's draw near to this exchange between Jesus and the man sitting by the pool called Bethesda.

It's a not so typical day because there is a festival unfolding. John doesn't bother to let us know which festival it is because, remember, he's not interested in a lot of details when he writes. His narratives, instead, take the reader to the heart of an issue with profound theological meaning.

In this case, the wider setting for the story has to do with a challenge coming from the Jewish authorities to the integrity of Jesus and to the joy of this suffering human being. In their eyes, Jesus had the audacity to heal the crippled man on the Sabbath. Never mind the man's suffering condition... never mind that he's been helpless for thirty-eight years... and never mind the awesome power displayed in bringing stability to the man's life. Put all that aside because they were concerned about breaking a rule. It was the Sabbath when Jesus brought new life to this man, and now that the invalid is up and moving about he's in trouble. Why? The man is carrying his mat and that's against the law.

Wow! There are people like that in this world, aren't there. They are so worried about the minute details of the law that they miss the larger purpose of life which is to bring glory to God and to express love to one another. Remember the greatest commandment in the eyes of Jesus? *Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as you love yourself.*

So, that's the big picture. Now let's hone in on the miracle unfolding because it's really what stands at the heart of this good news story. As previously mentioned, this man has been laid up for 38 years... 38 years of being helped to the pool every day... 38 years of being radically dependent upon someone for his well-being. And suddenly he is confronted with this stranger.

Can't you picture it? Jesus leans over this man lying in front of him and asks a critical question: *Do you want to be made well?* On the surface you have to wonder about the viability of this question. Wouldn't you think it would be kind of obvious that this guy would like to be healthy. Wouldn't you? But maybe it's not quite as foolish as it seems.

I can imagine that after 38 years, this gentleman might very well have been devoid of any hope. His condition had undoubtedly left him living in some level of despair. And maybe, just maybe, deep down in his hearts of hearts he was content the way he was. You know, a person can adjust to just about any condition in which he finds himself. And sometimes the thought of

change can be overwhelming and frightening. So Jesus, I think, was trying to genuinely discern where this man was living, emotionally speaking. And his inquiry worked because he discovered the man was trying to use a diversionary tactic.

He didn't respond by saying *Yes, sir, I want to be well*. Instead he made excuses to explain why he was in the condition he was in. He didn't have a way to get into the pool. Others were faster than he was. And in that moment, Jesus made a quick decision. He chose to take away the man's excuses and to present him with a new possibility. *Okay friend*, he said, *Stand up, take your mat and walk*. And he did.

What a remarkable exchange. Now we certainly don't know all the details surrounding the episode. We don't know the full extent of the conversation between the Healer and the one being saved. But we know enough to bring home a remarkable lesson to those of us fortunate enough to eavesdrop on this encounter. For we see that when Jesus enters the picture, anything is possible. When Jesus is part of the story, hope blooms. Do you believe that?

Because of the presence of this one they called Messiah, the man's life was forever changed. In this case, it was a physical change. He found himself able to do what was unthinkable but a moment before. But quick as can be there was suddenly an explosion of surprise, of wonder, of amazement... there was an explosion of hope. People could see with their own eyes that in Him, all things are possible.

Have you ever thought about being such an agent of change? If you are a child of God living as a disciple of Jesus you have that power, you know. No, I'm not going to suggest you can go around performing miracles of healing. But you can deliver a message of change and you can show hurting people a hopeful resolution to their challenges.

I chose to speak about this today because we have a mission team that is going to Ghana in the morning. While there, they are going to have opportunity to meet a lot of new people and to do some wonderful things. Meeting with the leaders of the Ghana Baptist Convention is one of them. Through these leaders, our team is going to have an opportunity to share their faith in a variety of settings. Their stories, which they have been preparing with great intention, are going to settle upon eager hearts and who knows how hope will bloom.

But the one thing that truly captures my attention and admiration the most is the experience coming their way while encountering the young women at the vocational training center at Frankadua. These are young women who have known nothing but oppression. Can you imagine being sold off by your family as a child into a slave trade that was in reality the exploitation of these beautiful yet helpless people?

Here they are now in Frankadua having been rescued and given a new chance. And here we are in a position to share with these young women the good news that they are loved and valued and cherished as human beings, and that there is one who can bring healing into their lives at many different levels. This, I think, is the story of healing by the pool called Bethesda in real time. And I, for one, will be eagerly awaiting the other side of this encounter to hear how these incredible experiences unfold.

When you come right down to it, this is why I'm an optimist. Yes, these are tough times and there are some horrible challenges out there. But within each of us there is the power to say *I can and will make a difference. I can touch a person and help to bring about a change that has the power to alter the course of their living.*

This is one of the reasons why we're here. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means to be an agent of hope, a child of grace, an authenticator of love, and an ambassador of good will. Could anything be more exciting? Does life get any better than that?

Maybe Paul said it best of all... **“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”** (Romans 8:28) And therein resides our hope!

Amen and AMEN!