

'Excuses.'

John 5: 1-9

The Commanding Officer at an Army base was furious when nine GI's who had been out on passes failed to show up for morning roll call. Not until 7:00 P.M. did the first man straggle in. "I'm sorry, sir," the soldier explained, "but I had a date and lost track of time, and I missed the bus back. Being determined to get in on time, I hired a cab. Halfway there, the cab broke down. I went to a farmhouse and persuaded the farmer to sell me a horse. I was riding back to the base when the animal fell dead. I walked the last ten miles, and just got here. "

Though skeptical, the Colonel let the young man off with a reprimand. However, after him, seven other stragglers in a row came in with the same story -- had a date, missed the bus, hired a cab, bought a horse, etc.

By the time the ninth man reported in, the Colonel had grown weary of it. "Okay, " he growled, "now what happened to YOU?"

"Sir, I had this date and missed the bus back, so I hired a cab....."

"Wait!" the Colonel screeched at him. "Don't tell me the cab broke down."

"No sir," replied the soldier. "The cab didn't break down. It was just that there were so many dead horses in the road, we had trouble getting through."

Like some of you, I too, was in the military service. It's a very different way of life than are a lot of other things. I remember that we were required to memorize certain facts and figures about the various types of weapons that we used, particularly something called their "maximum effective range." A weapon's "maximum effective range" is the greatest distance that one can fire the weapon and still expect to fire it with accuracy. For example, the maximum effective range of the M16A1 rifle is 460 meters. The maximum effective range of the M60 machine gun is 1100 meters. And so forth.

Well, a favorite thing of ours to say was this: "What is the maximum effective range of an *excuse*?" The answer is always the same: the maximum effective range of an excuse is zero meters.

Now, the military can be somewhat of a harsh environment. In there, they wouldn't excuse a guy even if he had two broken legs. But the idea is striking: *Excuses are seldom worth very much.*

In our text for today, we see a man who has been laying beside a pool for thirty-eight years. It was a pool of natural mineral waters which was considered beneficial for healing. And he, being paralyzed, had been laying there expecting someone to come along and pick him up and put him in the water. Thirty-eight years.....of waiting for it to happen.....and still no one helped him.

Now, this story is familiar to us. You have heard sermons on it before and so have I. So far, every sermon that I've heard on these few verses places the blame squarely on the people who are passing by and stepping over the man for thirty-eight miserable years.....until finally, Jesus comes riding in like the Cavalry, to save the day. Then triumphantly Jesus says to the man, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." The sermons we've all heard usually conclude with the preacher wagging his or her finger at us and warning us about just "stepping over" people who are in need -- whatever their need may be.

This week, I bring a little bit different twist to it. Because there are questions to be raised here: Didn't that man have a mouth with which to speak and ask for help from people? He certainly was able to communicate with Jesus. And: Let's suppose that he *did* ask for help. For thirty-eight years -- were every one of those people so indifferent to human suffering that they ignored his pleas? We don't know the whole story here of course, but there is something about the man's situation that doesn't ring quite right. As harsh as this might sound, *might* there be some excuse-making on his part? I wonder.

It's something we've all done....you have and I have.

Friends, hear me out at the outset: As grown-up people of God, we always are faced with a choice: We can (A) either make an honest effort to live out our Baptism and our Confirmation by being a faithful member of Christ's church. Or, we can (B) come up with any number of excuses as to why we can't.

We together, are the people of God. We are the church. Each of our parents made certain vows on our behalf when they presented us for Holy Baptism, and we made certain vows when we were confirmed as

members in Christ's church. A good part of those vows involved our own personal commitment to worshipping each week, and, supporting the work of the church through our prayers, through our financial giving, and through the best use of our own spiritual gifts in any one of the church's ministries.

Some of us in the church do each of those things very well.....but there others of us who still have room for growth in those areas. I fear that I may be preaching to the choir this morning/evening.....in more ways than one. Our members who really need to hear this aren't even here.

The man in our story is physically paralyzed, but what I am talking about today is a different kind of paralysis: a *paralysis of the spirit*. Any time that we fall into the pit of making excuses about our spiritual life.....*Oh, I can't come to worship because.....I don't give to the church because.....I don't pray because.....I haven't read the Bible since I was in Confirmation ninety years ago, because.....*we are in a **paralysis of the spirit**. And we become too content with just laying beside the pool of discipleship while others enter it.

Let me say parenthetically that we must differentiate between an "excuse" and a **valid reason**. It is fundamentally unfair to label everything as a lame excuse. Sometimes people are precluded from coming to worship because of health reasons or because they have to eke out a living on Sunday mornings. I understand that there are nuances in people's lives. What I'm talking about are the blatantly lame excuses that some people have manufactured.

There is a silly, entertaining movie entitled *King Ralph* in which John Goodman plays a Las Vegas entertainer who through research, is discovered to be a distant relative of England's Royal family. When the entire Royal family perishes in a freak accident, Goodman's character is brought to London to assume the throne as the new King of England.

The movie is filled with "King Ralph's" crude mannerisms and gaffs, all of which prove to be embarrassing for England and for the rookie King's mentor, "Willingham" (played by Peter O' Toole) in particular. The British press has a heyday with this of course, as the tabloids are filled with accounts of the new King's escapades and various "isms."

It doesn't take long for all of the pressure to get to him, and so "King Ralph" tells Willingham that he is going to quit the throne of England

and go back to his old life in America. As Ralph packs his suitcase for the trip, Willingham engages him in a heated argument. King Ralph tells Willingham that he doesn't fit in with Royal life, and that he wants out of it. But then Willingham tells him something that is very haunting: *"I'm asking you to think of something larger than yourself!"*

Friends, our Baptism and our Confirmation means that we *are* part of something that is larger than ourselves! I don't look at the church as being just one of many organizations that one can belong to. The church is up on a different level entirely. Our membership in Christ's church puts us squarely in the 2,000 year-old tradition of the Apostles and the Early Church Fathers.

When we are a part of the church, we are a part of the witness of the prophets. We are part of a Divine institution, the agency of God upon this earth! Don't even compare church membership with belonging to the local soccer club! They don't belong together in the same realm!

Many of us can name a long list of relatives and old friends whom, because of the busyness of life, we lose touch with. Phone calls, letters, post cards, and emails fall by the wayside. We may have the best of intentions, but we enter a kind of relational paralysis. It happens to all of us.

But it is our relationship with God that brings our deepest loss when we allow *that* particular relationship to slip away. God created us to worship, as well as to give and to serve. When those things slip away from us, and we become spiritually paralyzed -- then it is our soul that suffers.

In a small farming community around the Tennessee/Kentucky area, there lived a family consisting of four boys in their late teens, and their middle-aged parents. This was a good, hard-working family, but they had no use for the church. Despite the invitations of various members of the local congregation, the people in this particular family considered attending Sunday worship to be a colossal waste of time. Throughout the years, they turned a continual cold shoulder towards that community of faith.

Then one day, the mother was bitten by a rattlesnake while working in the garden and she became gravely ill. As she lay in bed with a wet

washcloth pressed against her forehead, her husband and four sons stood around in the bedroom with a collective feeling of helplessness.

At last it was decided that the local pastor should be summoned to their home to offer prayers for the sick woman, even though the family had always been resistant to spiritual matters up to that point.

One of the sons ran to fetch the pastor, who upon learning of the mother's condition, readily agreed to make a pastoral care visit to the family.

When he arrived in the bedroom, the four boys and their father were standing around the bed as the woman lay there. Kneeling down beside her, the pastor began to pray these words:

*Heavenly Father, I thank you that you hear the prayers of your people, and that you give to each according to their need. I thank you also, Father, that this family....after many years.. has decided to turn to you. Gracious Lord, I have long-suffered in trying to get them to turn to you, but each time they had refused. Each time I would call on them to drink from the Living Water who is Christ, they would steadfastly refuse.*

*And now at long last, I have reason to hope that they would repent and turn to you, Most Merciful God. Therefore, I ask not yet for healing, but for something else. It is apparent to me now, heavenly Father, that what this family needs the most right now.....are more rattlesnakes. For it is a rattlesnake that has been able to accomplish what I have not -- to get them to turn and come to faith in you. And so gracious God, I ask for more snakes. Please send a rattlesnake now to bite each of the boys, and a really big rattlesnake to bite the old man. For it is rattlesnakes who have been able to witness to this family.....so we ask that you send us more and bigger snakes. Amen.*

My friends, spiritual paralysis isn't a good thing. We aren't called to lay beside the pool -- we are called to get in it. You might be glad to know that I'm not inclined to ask God to send rattlesnakes to bite people. But I do pray that Jesus would say to the paralyzed souls of many people:  
*Take up your mat and walk.*

Amen.

Rev. David Mercer