Learning to Stand

John 5:1-9

By

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75th Anniversary Celebration Sunday
San Marino Community Church began with a dream of creating a community of faith for the families in this and surrounding communities. Today we celebrate 75 years of faithfulness; both the faithfulness of our Lord to that dream, and our faithfulness to carry it forward. The past 75 years have not been without some challenges and there have been some bumps and bruises along the way. Just like our lives, not everything goes according to plan. But this congregation has persevered. And I’m proud to have been a part of this ministry for the past ten years.

Years ago when I was still on the east coast at Princeton Seminary, I organized the orientation program for new students. Each year we had someone from the faculty speak to them in order to help prepare them for the demands of the upcoming academic program. One year, Professor Paul Rorem, from the History Department, addressed the students. He said, “Students often wonder why they are required to take so many history courses to meet distribution requirements for the degree. They would often prefer to take more practical courses. Why is history important? Because history offers perspective. And perspective offers hope. Knowing history doesn’t mean you will gain perspective automatically.” But to the wise that which is offered by history becomes instructive, and then it can lead to hope, again not automatically but it is there for the taking.

Here’s a little historical perspective for SMCC: It all began in 1941 when the Presbytery organized the first official worship service at which the congregation was formally constituted. It was the same year that Winston Churchill and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter, and Hitler initiated the “Final Solution” in Germany. The first commercial television license was issued in that year. M&M’s made their debut, as did Cheeri-oats (renamed Cherrios in 1945). Bob Hope performed his first USO show at March Field in California. And, of course, it was the year of Pearl Harbor and the American entrance into World War II. The Yankees won the World Series and the Chicago Bears were the Pro-Football Champions.
The University of Minnesota (my alma mater) won the college football championship: “Rah Rah, Shish Koomba!” The Heisman Trophy went to Bruce Smith, from the University of Minnesota. Life expectancy was 62.9 years. Cost of living in those days was based on an average income of $1,777 per year. A new house cost $4,075 (maybe a little more here in this neighborhood). A new car cost $850. Tuition at Harvard was $420 a year. Gasoline was $.12 per gallon. Bob Dylan, Faye Dunaway, Art Garfunkel, and Chubby Checkers were all born that year. “How Green Was My Valley” won Best Picture and Citizen Kane and Dumbo were also big releases.

And against that backdrop this church began to worship, and organize, and teach, and serve. Worship services have continued uninterrupted, as have the Session and Deacon meetings. Sunday school, or “Church School” as it was known, was a high priority. By the time P. Martin Baker finished his tenure, he had recruited and trained over 200 church school teachers. Music has been one of the hallmarks of the church through the years with wonderful choral and instrumental music. Friends, Lisa Edwards and Glenn DeLange have been here much longer than I have but we didn’t celebrate their tenth anniversary. Let’s thank them for their gifts shared so generously with all of us!

When I began my duties as the seventh pastor of this congregation, I was aware that I was building upon a foundation that others had labored to realize. We have been handed so much by those who have gone before us, those who contributed to the building and support of this church with their time, talents, and treasure. And it seemed to me that this was a church in its adolescence. Like a teenager, life sometimes unfolds in ways you think you never recover from. It might be failing a class or breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or sustaining an injury that takes you out of athletic competition. This congregation had some difficult days and it wondered whether it could ever recover and move on. We did! The story of faith is one of creation, fall, and restoration! And we have lived that story here.

And that brings me to this text from John’s Gospel about a man who waited for 38 years for a healing he couldn’t find. In this story, he wasn’t the only one paralyzed, but the
most obvious. Just a few months ago, with others from the Holy Land Trip, we stood above the Sheep Gate, at the pool of Bethesda, where this special healing took place. In this story, Jesus asked a simple question, “Do you want to be made well?” It’s a question that might be asked of us individually. “Do you want to be made well?” And it might be asked of us as a congregation. I have maintained and often said, “I believe health is just as contagious as disease. When you introduce health to the body (or to the body of Christ) it becomes contagious. We can become healthier in mind, body, and spirit. Obviously there are limits to how much we can affect our own health but I suspect for most of us, we already know what we might do to live a healthier life.

For 38 years this man had every excuse why he couldn’t find healing. He would lie there on the deck hoping to roll into the pool at just the right moment when the healing powers were stirred. Every day making his way down to the pool in the hope of healing, he grew accustomed to his way of life, but hoped for something better, something more. He was probably dependent upon the generosity of others. He probably blamed others for his lot in life. And then one encounter with the living Christ and his life changed dramatically. He had to find his own legs, take responsibility for his own life. He had to take a stand. He had to use his legs given him.

It reminds me of that familiar verse of Scripture from Isaiah with another question, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted but those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

For 75 years we have been learning to stand, to use our collective legs to get something accomplished in the name of, and for the sake of, Jesus Christ and the healing he intends for all people. We have sought to teach and learn all that we can. We have sought that

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1 Isaiah 40:28-31
perspective that comes from education and it has allowed us to experience hope through the challenges of the past 75 years. I think our Lord may be asking us today, as we celebrate this anniversary, “Do you want to be made well? Then stand up and take up your mat and walk!” No more excuses for why we can’t use the legs God almighty has given us. It’s time to stand up, and take a stand, and use what we have been given for the purposes for which God intends them.

Another friend, a professor at Princeton Seminary, tells the story of when he was a graduate student living with a woman of considerable means who rented out rooms in her home on Library Place in Princeton. In her dining room on the buffet, was a vase of Steuben glass, standing alone highlighted with recessed lights. It had a deep center that flared to a wide flat rim. The tulips the woman liked to fill it with fell against the rim, settling into a graceful swirl. It was an elegant thing of beauty, even to a young man in graduate school.

One day when the landlady was out of town, a student was washing the remains of the tulips from the vase and knocked it against the sink. A one-inch triangle of glass broke from the rim and the rest of it cracked from the tip of the triangle all the way down to its base. The students all felt sick about it and left it there on the kitchen counter. When the landlady returned and found her broken vase, she wasn’t so much angry as she was bereaved. For days and then weeks, the vase remained lying there on the kitchen counter. She was unable to bring herself to do the inevitable. “Maybe they can fix it somehow,” she would say from time to time. “Broken crystal cannot be repaired,” Bob would repeatedly tell her, realistic to the core. She supposed she knew it too. That she was being so unrealistic about repairing it bothered Bob, but she was paralyzed by her love for that vase.

Sometimes we think we understand reality and we are realists to the core. But there is more mystery to life than we imagine. Jesus was never one to be daunted by facts and never seemed to be much constrained by reality. Instead of our petty certainties about life and our arrogance about how things work, Jesus just seems to invite people to get
well, to experience some healing in their lives and spirits, just at his mere touch, like the man in our story today — the man who everyone assumed, after 38 years, would never get any better.

“I think I’m going to call up Steuben anyway to see if they might be able to fix it,” the landlady said once more. Bob tried to keep from rolling his eyes. “Why can’t she just give it up!” She contacted Steuben and asked if they might have some suggestion as to what she could do to restore the beautiful vase. They were sorry for her loss, saying the vase is no longer in production (exactly what Bob had told her!). But what they said next took her breath away. If she would bring the vase up to their store, their artists could fashion a replacement at Steuben’s expense. They’d copy and replace it, at no charge. Steuben would bear the high cost of what Bob and his roommates had broken.

Our realities are so small. You can’t fix broken crystal! Paralyzed people can’t get better. But he wasn’t the only paralyzed one, only the most obvious. The vase wasn’t an ordinary vase. It was a Steuben. When you fail to consider the source, the maker, you fail to understand the situation. There are so many paralyzed people, paralyzed by realities that are so devastating because they are partially true. Sometimes it takes people with delusions like the landlady and those here who through the years believed that this church, though broken at times, can be repaired. And it is capable of restoration because when you consider the creator, the owner, the source, all things are possible.

Who knows what the next seventy-five years will hold? I hope this congregation is still standing and engaged in ministry for a new generation. So let’s take up our mat and get on with it. Let’s stand together, and let’s walk together, confident that the one who has called us together will see us through whatever the future holds.

To the glory of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen