

Jon Hauerwas – The Servant – January 8, 2017
Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17

For centuries, people of all types have pursued certain healing properties in water. We in the church talk about the sort of cleansing that comes at the time of our baptism. But, this basic concept is nothing new. Throughout the twentieth century, Americans were drawn to the spas and saunas of Hot Springs, Arkansas. The whole town was billed as more than just a resort. In fact, much was said about the medicinal and even healing properties that bubbled straight to the surface. I imagine that some of you have visited Hot Springs, or another place like it, and learned about the fascinating history of that place.

Maybe you've even traveled to England and seen the Roman baths up close. There the naturally boiling waters became a place of worship and, it was believed, even healing. You may recall a gospel lesson where a man was said to have been suffering for 38 years.

I imagine that he has tried every possible remedy at his disposal and nothing has worked. So he joined the other locals who believed that those in need of healing could go to a pool at Bethzatha, and wait for the waters to begin swirling. Legend suggested that as soon as the waters began swirling the first person to immerse him or herself would be healed. The pool was free and open to the public;

you just had to be quick. But, how can this man be quick when he is getting older and more infirm by the day? The only answer is that someone else would have to help him.

It is then that Jesus enters and says, “Do you want to be healed?” The man responds, “There’s no one else to help me into the waters.” But, this man has missed the point. Because Jesus isn’t interested in legend. Undeterred, Jesus says, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” And so he does.

I have no intention of casting judgment on this man beside the pool in Bethzatha. This one who lived in a seemingly permanent state of infirmity. I can understand exactly why he responded the way that he did. Just as I can understand why most of us choose to respond in the ways that we do, as well. At times, we are all tempted to feel sorry for ourselves, or to self-medicate, or to go through our days acting bitter and angry. And at the heart of these very human struggles and reactions is the question about what it is that finally brings us healing.

So why is it, do you suppose, that we baptize infants, and invite children to the Lord’s Table even before they are able to fully comprehend the significance of what is happening in that moment? It’s certainly not practical, is it? Yet, we

baptize people of every age, from infants in arms to adult believers, because we believe that this practice says something significant about who God is.

Yes. This is a God who claims us from the very beginning, before we've ever really contemplated God's existence. Yes. This is a God who seals us and who marks our lives before we've ever had the chance to respond. Yes. This is a God who persistently, and even stubbornly, calls us into relationship no matter what we have done, or how we have lived, or who we have failed. This is a God who welcomes us all without exception.

And as we participate in these sacraments, I am often reminded that we, too, know only in part. And so, all are invited. Infants, children, people with learning and physical challenges, and adults at every point on the theological spectrum are invited to come and take part in God's free gift of grace. Because that's what the sacraments are truly all about. They don't finally point to us and what we're doing in the world. Instead, they point to God, and what God has done throughout history.

In our gospel lesson this morning we learn that Jesus, himself a part of history, submitted himself to baptism. He did so not because he needed to know that God forgives sins or because he was in need of forgiveness. After all, the

church has been claiming for centuries that while Jesus was tempted, he never succumbed to sin. Instead, he came to the banks of the Jordan River, and allowed John to baptize him as a sign of what God is doing in and through creation. He presented himself as a sign of God's reconciliation, and to welcome the work of the Holy Spirit.

And at the very center of it all, we find the symbolic power of water. A source of renewal and strength. Of forgiveness and cleansing. Of new life and rebirth. In Christ the old covenant has been fulfilled, and so we come. And with full assurance of faith, we bring our thirsty, tired, hungry souls to this water and to this Table, and we invite Christ to enter in. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.