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## Take Your Mat

### John 5:1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 5, 2013 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

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When you visit the National Holocaust museum in Washington DC, a small booklet is placed in your hands upon arrival. Each booklet contains the story of a man or woman affected by the Holocaust...a name and a face to carry with you as you walk through the museum. You start on the top floor, and with each flight of stairs down you turn the page in your booklet to see what was happening to “your person” at that point in history. At the final level, you find out if the person contained in your booklet survived the Holocaust or if they perished. It is a powerful way to give a specific name and specific story to the vast numbers...6 million is utterly incomprehensible. But carrying one individual’s story with you as you go personalizes the tragedy. It gives one name, one face, one life with whom to connect.

I have a professor from college was one of the historical advisors to the museum, and was therefore at the grand opening of the museum in 1993. He told me of being at the grand opening with many others, including scholars, civic leaders, and a number of Holocaust survivors. As the booklets were being handed out to the hundreds of special guests who had gathered for the very first tour, he heard the elderly gentleman next to him gasp, “Oh my, I’ve gotten my own book.”<sup>1</sup>

Did you have a chill run down your spine when you heard this story, as I did? Why do stories like this stick with us? In part because it is such a coincidence... among the many hundreds of different biographies, this man had been handed his own story. But perhaps it also sticks with us because it is stark reminder that we never really move past our past...it becomes part of who we are...our past shapes and marks us and changes us. While most of us have not experienced something like the Holocaust, each of us has our own set of stories...our books are filled with moments of joy and discovery, as well as pages of disappointment, disillusionment, and regret. And all of these stories become part of the fabric that is each one of us...it is the fabric that clothes us and forms the tapestry of our lives. And every once in awhile, like this man at the museum, we are given the opportunity to take stock, to look back and reflect on the events and experience that have given shape to our life.

In today’s gospel lesson from John 5 we hear the story of a man who is at Jerusalem’s sheep gate and is sitting by a pool with many other invalids, just out of reach of the water that was rumored to have healing properties. Jesus comes upon this withered man, who had been waiting by the pool for 38 years, and he speaks this simple phrase, “Stand up, take your mat, and walk.” And the man does so, and walks on his way. 38 years of long-suffering left behind with just a few short words.

Jesus doesn’t say, “stand up and walk away.” Instead he says, “stand up, take your mat, and walk.” Why would he give this instruction? The man certainly didn’t need his mat anymore. He’s been healed! His legs have been restored, and he’s been given the freedom to walk away from the place he’d spent decades in immobilized yearning. That mat could stay exactly where it is, and the man could just walk away from it. But Jesus says, “take your mat.”

Imagine for a moment what it was like to be this man. You’ve spent 38 years without the ability to move. This was before wheelchairs and prosthetic limbs...if you were paralyzed, you were stuck, stuck on your mat, completely reliant on the goodwill of others. 38 years is a lot longer in the ancient world than it is for us today. For many, it was a whole lifetime. And if you are this man, you’ve lived your lifetime by the sheep gate with a large flock of invalids as your community. All those who surround you are blind, or injured, or paralyzed...you’ve become companions out of common suffering and necessity, not out of choice. If you are this man, you’ve likely grown accustomed to being overlooked or dismissed. Passersby might look at you, but they don’t really see you...you’ve become used to people averting their eyes—refusing to make eye-contact, or simply

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<sup>1</sup> This story is recounted by Dr. Joseph Tyson, professor emeritus of Religious Studies at Southern Methodist University (his teaching tenure was from 1958-1998). I have no reason to doubt its veracity. He is a historian, after all.

avoiding the sheep gate altogether, so they don't have to look at you and your long-suffering community. You feel invisible, worthless, and helpless. And there is no escaping this feeling, no walking away from it all, because you literally can't move. You are stuck here on this mat. It is your home. It is your life. And your one hope for the possibility of new life rests in the nearby pool, where it is said angels dwell and every once in a great while stir the waters so that they have the power to heal.

I wonder if you know what it is like to yearn for something—to return to a place in your body, or perhaps in your head and heart, day after day, week after week, year after year? The very act of setting up a mat by a pool with healing waters reveals a profound sense of yearning. This is not a man at peace with his infirmity...this is a man who yearns for life to be different. This is a man who is doing whatever little he can to be in a place where healing could happen. Can you feel in your body, as he did in his own, the fervent prayer that the life you've known – your life, would be transformed? Can you connect with the despair that begins to take hold as years pass and your life remains unchanged? And can you also understand how when given the freedom to walk, and to walk away from the place of his suffering, that this man might not have wanted to take any part of the life he knew at the sheep gate with him? Why would he want to carry a physical and visible reminder of those 38 years?

But Jesus says, "Stand up, take your mat, and walk." In these few words Jesus removes the natural impulse to abandon the past. His few words challenge the man, "Let the mat remind you of where you've been: the companions who've surrounded you, the yearning for wholeness, the healing you've experienced. Take your mat. And walk." Can you feel the weight of the mat before the healing, and the weightlessness of it afterward?

This is complete healing. But the healing does not erase or undo the memory of the 38 years.

The mat isn't just a mat, after all. It is a scar. A scar that serves to remind the man of his past wounds and weaknesses, as well as his current healing and chance at new life. Think for a moment about your own scars. For each scar, there is an associated memory of how that scar came to be. And every time you look at the scar, you remember. I have a scar on my thumb from when I was about 10 and cutting carrots for a slumber party at my best friend's house. And whenever I see it, I'm reminded of that night. What do your scars remind you of? The scar from a cesarean section might carry with it a smile at the thought of the child you've welcomed into your life. That scar on your leg, a childhood sports injury. The surgical scar from a mastectomy might be a poignant reminder of a hard fought battle against cancer. Why do we remember these scars? Because scars mark us in a significant way. Their importance lies in the fact that they can literally change our shape. And in so doing, the scars change our very selves.

There are a number of stories in scripture that speak to scars and to remembering. Think about the rainbow in the sky after the flood...the colorful threads of light that stitched the sky back together after the 40 days of torrential rain. The rainbow is a scar. It is a scar that reminds us of human disobedience and grief, but also how God transforms the destruction with light and color, healing and new life. It is a scar of promise. It is a reminder of God's commitment to be faithful to us—a sign of a healed relationship.

In Genesis, Jacob spent a dark night lost in an anguish-filled struggle against God. And Jacob didn't leave that night unscathed. Daybreak carried with it a limp, a permanent reminder with every step of that night. But the limp isn't just a reminder of the struggle, it's a reminder of the transformation. With every step, Jacob recalls transformation and blessing. It is in our deepest struggles that we wrestle and strive and struggle and persevere to discover the ways that God can bring blessing out of our suffering. The wrestling and wounding aren't all for nothing...we can wrestle blessing out of the worn path of our poor choices, lost hopes, weary hearts. The long night of wrestling can lead to a daybreak of transformation.

The mat, the rainbow, the limp...these are all scars that point to a healed life, to a life beyond the wound – to life anew.

It is common in our culture to want to just move past the memories that scar us, isn't it? We often don't want to look at our scars and remember. And we don't necessarily have patience for other people's scars either. Think of how that often plays out even in day-to-day interactions. Have you ever found yourself thinking, "well that person just needs to get over it!" or saying to a friend, "you really need to move past this." It's easy to want to

skip past the painful parts...to want to stash them away in an attic or basement, safely out of sight and out of mind. We don't want to be vulnerable with ourselves, let alone others. We are afraid to reveal our wounds, as this might prompt in others (and in ourselves) judgment, pity, or rejection.

Now ask yourself how often someone has said to you instead, "you might need to really dwell in this place of pain and regret for awhile...you might need to explore its depths and uncover its gifts and allow yourself to remember and to learn." It takes a lot of courage and patience to sit in a place and hold your gaze steady on places of tainted memories, sadness, disappointments, and regret. But it's in holding our gaze steady and being willing abide in the struggle that we find hope at the other side. Because Jesus tells this man, who knows yearning, hope, and long-suffering, "take your mat." And in these words, Jesus asks you to claim the marks of your pain and your suffering, to embrace your particular scars, and to befriend your unique wounds, and to let them reveal to you their truth.

No suffering or pain is wasted in the economy of God's grace. God is in the business of mending and making beautiful all the suffering we know. God isn't the mastermind of our lives, in the way that a puppeteer is—orchestrating suffering and pain to teach us lessons. But God is the master *over* our lives, lovingly transforming all those things that have been a source of grief, a heavy burden. If you will only take your mat, God promises to sanctify it and transform it...every part of your suffering and every part of your past. If you will only take your mat, you will find that there is no part of you beyond the bounds of God's grace and healing. Because as hard as it can be to look at your own life, and as much as you may want to avert your eyes from your own suffering, Christ holds his gaze steady on you. Christ looks with compassion and love on all your despair, on all your failure. Christ is with you in the places you feel immobilized, blind, and paralyzed. He looks deeply and carefully into your eyes so that you will know that you are not invisible to God, you are not worthless, you are not helpless. You are cared for. You are beloved.

Like the man lying on his mat, Jesus sees you and your longing. He sees your suffering and the wounds that that mat represents. And when he comes to heal you, he will not let your suffering go to waste. He will transform you right along with your wounds. He will make you and your mat into something beautiful – like the scars in his own glorified hands and feet – he will let you keep them to remind you of where you've been and how you have been healed so that you can glorify God and that God can be glorified in your testimony of healing and new life.

So when the time comes for healing, and Jesus asks you to stand up and walk—have courage, and take your mat with you.