

Powerless

Sermon by Rev. Grant H. Odhner

(BA Cathedral 3/15/20)

“And a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years.” (Jn 5.5)

As you know, because of “social-distancing”¹ I’m speaking today to a nearly empty Cathedral.

It feels strange. In the past I’ve looked out on a few hundred faces here. I know, intellectually, that I’m addressing as many people, perhaps more than I would otherwise. But the reality *seems* so different. I know you’re listening to my words and our minds are connecting around the thoughts I’m sharing. That means that hundreds of minds are being brought into sync. Yet in the moment I have no sense of that. Nor do you, sitting in your home.

There are a lot of things in life that are not the way they seem to us. Emanuel Swedenborg, prophet of the New Church, assures us that our normal state of awareness is erroneous—or we could just say, limited. It seems like our thoughts originate in us. It seems like they’re our own. The reality is that we have no life. It flows into us from sources outside of us, ultimately from God. The life that we experience is shared by others. It only seems to be our own.

God intends that we have this sense that life is our own. Swedenborg calls this sense of Self “proprium.” A Latin word that means “what is our own, our property.” The Lord wants us to enjoy His life and to feel it as our own. But He also wants us to enjoy the truth: the truth that life is a gift from Him. *Enjoy* the truth, I say? Yes, because it’s always more pleasurable to know the truth, to be aware of the way things really are (cf. AC 5749). Also, I say “enjoy the truth” because when we know the truth and believe it, the Lord can share a greater sense of His presence. And this magnifies our joy.

This truth about our life inflowing is an important subtext to our message today. We’re looking at the spiritual significance of John 5. The Lord heals a man who is *astheneia* (*as-then-ay-a*)—literally “without strength,” “without power.” One of the themes that runs through John is that the Lord alone has life and power. This note is struck in John’s introduction:

- In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. (John 1:4)

And the note is struck again in John’s conclusion:

- these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:31)

¹ Due to the coronavirus pandemic

And the note is sounded all the way through:

- as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself.... (John 5:26) [from our reading just now]
- the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. (John 6:33)
- I have come that [My sheep] may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly. (John 10:10)
- I am the resurrection and the life. (John 11:25)

To cite just a few. We also read in John:

- I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered.... (John 15:5-6)

“Without Me you can do nothing.” True of our natural life, and of our spiritual life.

The man whom the Lord healed at the pool of Bethesda, who was *astheneia*—without power—represents the state of the human race—of that time, and of any time. We are, of ourselves, without power.

In the five porches around the pool of Bethesda “lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water” (John 5:3). We are a sorry lot, humanity. Not regarded from the Lord, our wonderful Maker, and from His plan. But from our penchant for not seeing the goodness of His plan, not following it. We’ve brought a lot of sickness and disorder on ourselves.

Yet we are gathered by the pool of Bethesda. “Bayth-hesda” means “House of Mercy.” My mind goes to Genesis 1 (v.2), where the Spirit of God hovers over the face of the waters (before there is even light). In explaining the spiritual meaning of this the Writings say, “By the ‘Spirit of God’ is meant the Lord’s mercy, which is said to ‘hover’ as a hen over her eggs” (AC 19). In His mercy the Lord is there to restore our ability to live spiritually. He came into the world to do that—when we had lost our way, and had no power to return to Him.

All those people lying around the pool of Bethesda were “waiting for the moving of the water.”

For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. (John 5:4)

This verse represents the regeneration process. The pool of water is our outer mind. The “water” is our knowledge of truth. This knowledge sits there in our memory, and in our outer thought, but brings no change in our spirit unless it is stirred by spiritual influx—by an impulse from our inner self which affirms that truth and believes it. This higher impulse (decision, on our part, really) is the

“angel coming down and stirring the water.” And the “stepping into the water” is when we act on that truth, put it into our life—“stepping into it.”

Now, in our story no one does this. The focal point is the man who is *astheneia*, without power. He represents the state of humanity. In His mercy the Lord came to restore humanity’s ability to be regenerated.

“When Jesus saw him lying there, [He] knew that he already had been [in that condition] a long time” (John 5:6). The Lord knows.

It is hard for us to understand why the Lord doesn’t come to our aid sooner. He knows. Why doesn’t He help. The timing of healing is beyond our ken.

We’re told that the man “had an infirmity (*astheneia*) thirty-eight years” (John 5:5). This is an interesting number. It appears one other place in Scripture, Deuteronomy chapter 2.² Israel is standing on the banks of the Jordan looking over into the Promised Land. Moses is reviewing their history. It was in year thirty-eight of their forty wilderness years that all the men who had doubted Jehovah’s power to bring them into the land had died, and Jehovah told Moses to head for the Land. They were now ready to enter.³ The forty years in the wilderness represent the first phase of regeneration. In that phase we fight mostly from our understanding of truth, not so much from the heart. We fight with a sense that the fight is ours. We “enter the Land” (the second phase of regeneration) when we fight from love, and with the realization that the Lord is waging the battle for us (AC 8539; TCR 105, 587).

So the Lord is speaking to a new state of readiness when he says to the man after thirty-eight years of struggle, "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6). And note the response:

The powerless man answered Him, "Lord, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me." (John 5:7)

Note well, he does not answer, “Yes, I want to be made well.” Rather, he says, “I have no man to put me into the pool.” “I have no man.” “While I am coming down” (making effort), “another steps down before me” (my effort is fruitless). In the spiritual sense, I think, this is a confession of our powerlessness. “Yes, I want to be made well” would be voicing our personal desire. “I want.” But this story is about acting with the realization that we act from the Lord’s power. “I have no man.”

And so, Jesus doesn’t wait for a “yes,” but simply says, "Rise, take up your bed and walk. And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked" (John 5:8-9).

His action follows without further response because he is acting from the Lord. “Walking” (like “stepping in to the pool”) is a symbol for living (AC 519). “Taking up our bed” means taking up the bed of natural ideas (importantly, ideas from the Word) that our inner self has lying beneath

² i.e. New Church canon of Scripture.

³ “Thirty” is a symbol of fullness of preparation and readiness (AC 5335, 7984). Joseph was thirty when he began to rule Egypt (Gen 41.46); David was thirty when he became king (II Sam 5.4); Jesus was thirty when He began His ministry (Lk 3.23). “Eight” means a new beginning (AC 2043-2044, 2866). The eighth day is the first day after a complete week, the beginning of a new week. The Lord helps us when we are prepared, ready.

itself, and actually using them to live well, putting them into life (cf. AC 10360.8; AR 137; AE 163).

"Rise, take up your bed and walk. And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath" (John 5:8-9).

"And that day was the Sabbath." This phrase says it all, in the spiritual sense. The Sabbath represents the truth that the Lord alone regenerates us. We labor in our six days, but we are to rest on the seventh in recognition that in reality the Lord alone works, and we work in Him, from Him, "as though of ourselves." (Sabbath: AC 10729-10731.)

Friends, this is the faith of the New Heaven and the New Church that we are invited to hold. This faith is summarized in a number of places in the Writings in five points.

- (1) God is one ... and the Lord God the Savior Jesus Christ is that one.
- (2) Saving faith is to believe in Him.
- (3) Evils should not be done, because they are of the devil and from the devil.
- (4) Goods should be done, because they are of God and from God.
- (5) These should be done by us as though by ourselves; but we should believe that they are done by the Lord in us and through us. (TCR 3.2, pronouns modified)

Done by the Lord in us and through us. How are we to hold this? First of all, it belies the appearance: that if we don't exert effort, even compel ourselves, nothing will get done. And in the second place, we know that our efforts to resist evil and do good things are imperfect. How can we hold them as done by God? Our motives are never pure; there is always some self-interest in the good that we do. "Done by the Lord, in us"?

But other teachings of the New Church help us here. Yes, our motives are mixed, but the Lord is overseeing the process. He works with us to bring us from our natural, and unregenerate state to a better and better place. He holds us in an "intermediate" state of good, where our sincere wish to act in a heavenly way is paired with self-centered or world-centered affections, provided they are not poisoned by feelings like contempt for others, and provided they are not our primary motivation. He allows them to be there, and gradually weans us from them. Still, we can always recognize that when we sincerely wish to do the right thing, it is the Lord with us who is providing the affection and the power to do that, even though we feel these as our own. The good—insofar as it is good—is done by the Lord in and through us.

Another teaching helps. We're told often that the Lord does not expect us to acknowledge right away just how fully He is responsible for the good we do. For example, we read:

Such is the first state of all who are being reformed and made spiritual... that they do not believe that they are reformed by the Lord but by themselves, that is, they believe all of the will of good and of the thought of truth to be from themselves. They are also left in this state by the Lord, since in no other way can they be reformed. For if it should be said to them (before they have been regenerated) that they cannot do anything of good from themselves, or think anything of truth from themselves, they would then... fall into the error of thinking that they must wait for influx into the will and influx into the thought, and if this does not take place

must attempt nothing. ... Or [they would fall] into the idea that if [all the will of good and the thought of truth were from the Lord], they would be like machines, and not their own masters or in control of themselves. ... It is therefore permitted them at that time to think that good and truth are from themselves.

The passage continues:

But after [people] are regenerate, then by degrees the knowledge is insinuated into them that the case is otherwise, and that all good and truth are solely from the Lord. And still further, when they are becoming more perfected, it is insinuated that whatever does not come from the Lord is evil and false. To the regenerate, if not in the life of the body still in the other life, it is given not only to know this, but also to perceive it; for all the angels are in the perception that it is so. (AC 2946)⁴

The Writings say a lot about the angels' delight in perceiving the Lord's presence in their mental life. The amazing thing is that perceiving this does not make them feel less empowered and alive, but more so. There is a paradox at play. The work *Divine Providence* puts it this way:

With the angels, especially the angels of the third heaven, [the truth that all life is from the Lord] is confirmed not only through reasons but also through living perceptions. These angels perceive the influx of Divine love and Divine wisdom from the Lord. And because they perceive it, and from their wisdom know that Love and Wisdom are life, they say that they live from the Lord and not from themselves. And they not only say this but they also love it and desire it to be so. Nevertheless, they are still to all appearance as if they lived from themselves. Indeed, this appearance is stronger with them than with other angels; for as was shown above (n. 42-45), "The more nearly anyone is conjoined to the Lord the more distinctly do they appear to themselves to be their own, and yet the more evidently do they recognize that they are the Lord's." (DP 158⁵)

We do not have to wait till the other life to recognize that the Lord is the source of our very effort to do good. We are invited to begin recognizing that right now.

"That person is struggling. Maybe I should reach out to her. Oh, that is the Lord with me. ... But I see a feeling welling up that I'm good for having thought that. Yes, that is a lower thought, perhaps from hell. I can let that go. It's false. But aren't I good for having noticed hell and let it go! Hmm, no, it was the Lord in me that brought that awareness."

This kind of awareness of the Lord and of the inflowing of good and evil is freeing and delightful. Can we maintain it all of the time? I know I can't at this point. But it sure is wonderful when I can. Doing it more regularly is a product of those forty years in the wilderness, and the fuller recognition of our powerlessness. But thirty eight years does come, when the Lord says, you are ready to head for the Promised Land. "Rise, take up your mat and walk." This is the Sabbath realization that the Lord invites us to.

⁴ Further references on angels' perception of the Lord's life: AC 29, 39, 1661.3, 42657.5, 2678, 2960, 2974, 5747.2-3, 5759, 2654.4, 3742, 6128, 6469, 1735.2, 2016, 2654.4, 2882, 2891, 5758.1-2, 8865, 10098; DP 156; AE 248:3.; HH 8.; AE 1134.2-3; cf. AC 8495.3

⁵ first person changed to third in last sentence.

Like the man lying helpless by the pool of Bethesda, we have no power whatsoever to be healed, to regenerate ourselves, to shun evil, to do good.

But we are never—for one instant—left to ourselves. The Lord is with us.
Amen.

Lessons: John 5.1-30; AC 5660

AC 5660.2-3

[In the other life, when spirits are being initiated into good by means of truths, and especially into this truth—that everything they think and will flows into them, thus that they have no power to think and to will from themselves—]they resist as much as they can, believing that if this were so they would have no life of their own (*vita propria illis*).... They are permitted to think this way, even to the extent of almost coming to the conclusion that they do not desire to receive good and truth from this source, but from some other source by which there would not be such a loss of their Sense of Self (*proprii*). And sometimes it is given them to inquire where they may find it. Yet afterward when they find it nowhere, those who are being regenerated come back, and in freedom choose to be led by the Lord in their willing and thinking. They are then informed that they will receive a Sense of Self-existence that is heavenly, such as angels have....

As regards the Sense of Self that is heavenly, this comes forth from the new will that is given by the Lord, and differs from a person's Sense of Self in the fact that they who have it no longer regard themselves in each and all things they do, and in each and all things they learn or teach. But they then have regard to the neighbor, the public, the church, the Lord's kingdom, and in this way to the Lord Himself. It is the ends-in-view of life that are changed. The ends that look to lower things, that is, to self and the world, are moved back, and ends that look to higher things are substituted in their place. ... One who is gifted with a Sense of Self that is heavenly is also in quietude and in peace; for they trust in the Lord, and believe that nothing of evil will reach them, and know that selfish-desires will not infest them. And in addition, people who are in a heavenly Sense of Self are in freedom itself; for to be led by the Lord is freedom, because they are led in good, by good, to good. From this it is evident that they are in blessedness and happiness, for there is nothing that disturbs them....