

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, May 11, 2014**

**WHAT DO YOU *REALLY* WANT?**

**John 5:1-9**

How many of you have ever heard the comedy of Bill Engvall? Anybody? You can tell this is northern Virginia. Hardly any rednecks here. Bill Engvall is part of the Blue Collar Comedy Tour with the king of rednecks, Jeff Foxworthy and some others. I have to admit that it doesn't matter that I'm a Jew from New Jersey, I still think it's funny. There are rednecks everywhere, after all.

Well, Engvall has this routine that's kind of the heart of what he does and it's called "Here's Your Sign." He says that stupid people should have to wear signs that just say, "I'm stupid." You wear it around your neck and that way people wouldn't rely on you. They wouldn't ask anything, they wouldn't try to get any help from you, they wouldn't mess with you if they didn't have to. They would see you and say, "Oh, excuse me. Never mind. I didn't see your sign." And he gives some examples of the way this works. You have to know that the kind of people he's talking about are the sort of people who have a tendency to ask really dumb questions. For instance, somebody might have come up to me this morning and said, "So, did you shave your face this morning?" Engvall's response to that probably would be something along the lines of, "No, this is a mask. I actually look like that guy from Duck Dynasty."

You start with dumb questions and you get snarky responses. Here are a few examples. He says, "I stayed late at work one night and a coworker looked at me and said, 'Are you still here?' And I said, 'No, I left ten minutes ago.' Last time I had a flat tire I pulled my truck into one of those side-of-the-road gas stations. The attendant walks out, looks at my truck, looks at me, and says, 'Tire go flat?' I couldn't resist. I said, 'Nope, I was driving around and those other three just swelled up right in front of me.'

"A couple of months ago I went fishing with a buddy of mine and as we pulled his boat into the dock, I lifted up this big string of bass and this idiot on the dock goes, 'Hey, y'all catch all those fish?' I said, 'Nope, talked them into giving up.'

"It's like before my wife and I moved," [this is Engvall, not Maryanne and me] "our house was full of boxes and there was a U-Haul truck in our driveway. A neighbor comes over and says, 'Hey, you movin'?' I say, 'No, we just pack our stuff up once or twice a week to see how many boxes it takes. 'Cause it changes all the time.'"

Now all of this comes to mind, not because I wanted to start off with getting some laughs, but because of this passage from the Gospel of John. Jesus sets him up as one of those guys who needs to wear a sign. He asks a stupid question, "Do you want to get well?" To which the guy at the pool probably wants to say, "No, I hang out here because of the great trout fishing." But as it turns out, it's not a dumb question that Jesus asks him.

Rather, it is one that has implications that the man He meets at the pool probably never thought of and it's one with implications that we have probably never thought of as well.

Let's take a look at this story. First, let's get some of the setting. First John mentions a feast in verse 1. He doesn't say which one it is, so we don't know exactly when this happens in the course of the year. It's not really germane to the story. He just says that because he wants to let them know this happened at a specific time. It's not a generic story. It's one that happened at a particular place and a particular time. He goes on to describe the place. He says it takes place near one of the gates in the walls of the city.

At that time, you know, Jerusalem was much smaller than it is now and most of the city was surrounded by a wall that is still there. There is a variety of gates. There's the Jaffa Gate which has a road that comes out of it that leads to the Phoenician city of Jaffa. There's another one called the Damascus Gate and where do you think the road there leads to? Here's your sign! It leads to Damascus. There's another one that leads to the Dung Gate and I'm not going to get into why it's called that, but I'm not making that up. And there's another one called the Sheep Gate. It was called that, oddly enough, because the city's sheep market was right nearby. Still within the walls, but when people wanted to bring sheep to the market they had to come in through that gate. It was on the northwest side of the city. Now near that gate there was a pool. That pool was called Bethesda, it was called Bethzatha, it was called Bethesda and it was next to what is the present day sight of the Church of St. Anne. If you go to Jerusalem today you can see the pool in question. A church actually was built over it at one time. There's now a church right next to it that has some of the most incredible acoustics I have ever heard. It even made me sound good. God still does miracles, folks. While it is dry, you can see where the five colonnades that John mentions in verse 2 were.

Now the pool itself was believed to have healing properties. It was believed that if you went down into the waters of this pool with whatever physical ailment you happened to have, it would cure you. It would cure you of leprosy, it would cure you of paralysis, if you went in and put your head in the water it could cure you of blindness. But there was something special about it that was not mentioned in the original texts of John, most of the oldest manuscripts of John, but which was added later on in some of the later manuscripts by way of explanation. Take a look in your Bible and you'll see there's no verse 4. It just goes from 3 to 5. Verse 3 and 4 at one point said, "Here a great number of people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed – waiting for the moving of the water, for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred the water." Now here's the really important part. "Whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had." So you had to go down at the right time, when the waters were stirred and you had to be the first one into it. Presumably the angel only gave it enough healing power to do one at a time. That kind of makes some sense of what the paralytic said to Jesus a little later on. We'll get to that in a moment.

Crowds would gather around this pool and they would be waiting for whatever the signal was. I can't imagine that there was somebody standing there with a special eyepiece and he would say, "There's an angel there! Go!" And they would all jump. But somehow

there was a signal of some sort that now was the time to get into the water and that had the effect, as crowds usually do, of making it difficult for any one person to get in. If only the first person in is going to be healed it means that there's going to be a rush. It's like getting the first X-Box every Christmas. Sometimes the crowds turn ugly and they wind up on the national news. But they would rush in. And the state of the heart of the person climbing into the water apparently didn't matter. It didn't matter if he'd pushed people out of the way or stepped on people in the course of trying to get in there. As long as you got in first, you were the one who was going to get the healing, and those who were paralyzed, especially, would have a tremendously difficult time of it. If you can't move very well, then obviously people with other problems but who happen to be mobile are going to get in before you do.

Well, that's the setting. At this point, according to verse 6, Jesus saw this man lying there and He learned that he had been in this condition, he had been paralyzed – he's referred to in the NIV as being an invalid – for 38 years. I don't know if he was born that way or if that was an acquired condition, but whatever it was, for an enormously long time this man had been dealing with this physical disability and he had been trying to get into this water in order to be healed. So Jesus saw him there and He found out what was wrong with him, found out that he had been there for 38 years, or for a long time in any case. By finding that out He would have been able to surmise easily that no one had ever had compassion on this man. No one had ever looked at this man and said, "He's not mobile. He can't get into the pool. I need to help him get in there." Because people were looking out for themselves. They were looking to get what they could get out of it.

We don't know why Jesus chose this particular man. Maybe it was because of his paralysis. But for whatever reason, upon seeing him He asks a question which is so obvious it would seem to warrant one of Bill Engvall's signs. In verse 6 He says, "Do you want to get well?" Now what's interesting there is what He *doesn't* ask him. He doesn't ask him if he wants help getting into the pool. He doesn't ask him what he expects to happen if he is able to get into the water. He doesn't even ask him, "What do you want Me to do for you?" He asks him, in essence, "What do you *really* want? What are you looking to see happen?" And in doing so, what He was asking was, "Do you really want to be healed or do you want to act according to your predetermined beliefs and assumptions? Do you want to be healed regardless of the methodology or do you want to go with what *you* think is the best thing for you?" And the man's response is revealing. He says in verse 7, "Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred." That's the reference back to the now-departed verse 4 that was interpolated later on. He knew the story. He knew about the idea that the water had to be stirred in order for it to have healing properties. "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in someone else goes down ahead of me." Woe is me! I don't say this as a matter of criticism and it's certainly not criticism of people who have disabilities or who have problems or who just seem to have gotten the short end of the stick in life. He plays the victim card. "When I'm trying to get in there's always somebody ahead of me. There is always somebody pushing me aside. There is always somebody who is better off than me (at least in terms of mobility) who is getting in there before I can. And no one will help me. No one will give me, as it were, a leg up." It

never occurs to him to ask Jesus to heal him. I'd say the chances are pretty good that he has no idea who Jesus is or what He's capable of. Instead, he explains his problem in terms of what he thinks the waters of the pool can do for him, and in the process he confuses means and ends. Jesus was asking him, "What's the end game? What do you want to happen? What do you want to see accomplished? Do you want to be healed?" And his response was, "Well, there's this water I'm trying to get into and nobody helps me into it and I can't get into it and.... What was the question again?"

The matter of healing just kind of drops out of the picture for him because he is so tunnel-visioned on the means by which something is supposed to happen that he forgets what the end is. I'm sure we never do that, right? I'll give you an example of one of the ways in which we do. I'm going to use this example specifically because I know that our children's director, Julie Cloutier, does not think like this. So this has nothing to do with her. Rather, this does have to do with the way some people look at the way Vacation Bible School works. If you ask some directors of children's Vacation Bible Schools, "What's your goal for this year's VBS?" the answer will be something like, "We would like to have 200 children at VBS." That sounds good, right? That sounds like something worth having, bringing 200 kids to the church, exposing them to the gospel. What if you asked that person the way Jesus asked the man about healing. What if you asked that person instead, "What would you think if, instead of having 200 children at Vacation Bible School, you had 10 children and all of them gave their lives to Christ, or the 200 all came, had a good time and you provided free babysitting for their parents and they went home and promptly forgot everything they heard. Which would you rather have?" The person who's not paying attention would say, "You're right. Our goal for VBS has changed. We now want 10 children at VBS." No! You don't want 10 children at VBS, you don't want 100 children at VBS. What you want is for the children who come, no matter how many there are, to have their lives transformed. That's the goal. The other stuff is the means by which that happens.

Since it's Mother's Day let's try a family example to get this idea across. Moms, do you have children who ever do not do their chores? If you'd rather, I'll put this a different way. Moms, do you have any children who *do* do their chores? Let's assume for a moment that nobody here has perfect children. So Moms you want your children to do whatever tasks you've assigned them around the house – empty the dishwasher, take out the garbage, whatever it might be. Now focusing on the means would be a matter of saying to yourself, "I have got to get Johnny to take out the garbage or I am going to whip his backside!" Because you think corporal punishment will get you what you want. The real goal is not the corporal punishment. The real goal is getting Johnny to take out the garbage. Now corporal punishment might be the way to achieve that goal. Or it might be that a word of encouragement might do it. It might be that a bribe is the most effective means. And I do not say that lightly, because sometimes positive reinforcement – that's a better word than bribe, isn't it? – positive reinforcement can be more effective than negative reinforcement. We've tended to move in that direction when it comes to preaching the gospel, haven't we? It's more important to tell people about the love and the grace of Christ than it is to threaten them with hell. It's not to say that we don't believe in hell. It's not to say that we don't believe there are consequences for rejecting

Christ. But these days the likelihood of scaring somebody into faith is not what it used to be. We'll just put it that way. Jonathan Edwards is dead and he's been dead for over 300 years. So today we take a different approach. We take what we think of as a more positive approach, offering people love and grace rather than punishment and wrath.

The punishment and wrath may come in at some point in the same way that the corporal punishment on Johnny may come in at some point, but that doesn't mean that's necessarily where you start. The whole point is focusing on means will sometimes deflect us from what's really important. Not that it's not important to get the means right, but if there are lots of different ways of acting that are right and good, then the end is where the focus should be. And that's what Jesus asks this man to do. "Forget about the pool. Forget about getting in the water. If what you really want is to be made well, there's only one real source of that and that's Me." And that's why in verse 8, Jesus doesn't argue with him, He doesn't try to change his mind, He doesn't tell him he's wrong. He simply says, "Get up, pick up your mat and walk." And the very first thing through the man's mind might have been, "Oh, come on. Who are you fooling? I haven't even been in the water." But then, as he grabs his mat he begins to notice that there's a strength in his legs that he had not had before and he starts to push up and before long he is upright and he is looking this Man who has given him this incredible gift in the eye, where before he could only look up at Him. And I imagine at that point, though John doesn't record it, that the man thanked Him. Thanked Him for the gift that He had given him.

As a matter of fact, I know he does, because if you read farther down in the passage you see in verse 14 that Jesus later found him at the Temple. Verse 13 says that he in fact didn't know who Jesus was, who had healed him, but Jesus found him at the Temple and said to him, "See, you're well again." And then He says, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." Now that raises other questions we don't have time to go into, but let's leave it at this. He doesn't just physically heal the man. He also calls him to spiritual healing as well. This is not a threat, this is a statement of fact. And the man went away and told his fellow Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. He didn't go and tell them that it was Jesus who put him into the pool. It wasn't Jesus who gave him a hand to carry out his own plans because His plans were to skip all the intermediaries and to go right to the source.

The source of the man's healing was not the water. It never was. The source of the man's healing was the One whom he met by the pool Who asked him, "What is really important to you? What do you really want out of this life?" And then even though the man didn't directly respond to Him with what we might think of as the right answer, He gave it to him simply out of love and compassion and then that man recognized that in fact he'd been wrong all along. He'd been looking at means as being what life was really about rather than the ends. And the end for him wasn't the water. The truth is that the end for him wasn't even the healing. The end for him was the relationship that he then set foot on with Christ and that's why the really important part of this story is not that Jesus healed him. The really important part of this story is that he went away and told them Who it was that had done the healing.