

# ***He Too Had a Mother***

**John 5:1-9**

Text:

*“Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.”* John 5:8

## **Introduction**

Nearly fifty years ago, the Rev. Dr. James Ashbrook, Professor of Pastoral Care at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, contended that there are three aspects to personal responsibility: responsibility for oneself, responsibility for others, and responsibility for the world. Taking responsibility for oneself is essential to autonomous being, to self-determination, and to the art of becoming a self-integrated, fully-actualized individual. By the same token, exercising responsibility for others provides the necessary sinew in the structure of relationships for the smooth functioning and essential well-being of the community in which we live. The caution in this second aspect of responsibility, however, is that one must exercise responsibility for others without usurping the responsibility they have for themselves. The third aspect of responsibility—our responsibility for the world—implies a global morality, or to say it a different way, a personal morality on a global scale. This raises a greater challenge than the first two aspects, in that each of us is just one person, and to assume an active, ethical posture regarding the entire world around us calls for a collective mind to engage in a collective action for a collective benefit or universal result; and, needless to say, this is a gargantuan test of human ingenuity. Three aspects to personal responsibility: responsibility for self, for others, and for the world.

For nearly fifty years, I have wrestled with this bold assertion, perhaps never to a satisfactory conclusion. The struggle has not resided in the understanding of the concept of three-dimensional responsibility but, rather, in maintaining a balance among the three dimensions. At too many crossroads in life, it has seemed enough to take responsibility for my own actions, and then to rationalize that others must do the same, and then, of course, to console my restless conscience with the dismissive plea that, *after all, in this vast world, I am only one person*. This one-dimensional expression of responsibility—that is, *I am responsible only for myself*—leaves me a pathetic prey of the heinous sin of self-justification.

## **Three Dimensions of Responsibility By the Pool**

Here in John 5—in the passage of a paralyzed man by the pool—we discover an inherent brilliance: that is, all three dimensions of responsibility come into play and interact with each other. For the next few moments we’ll examine each of these dimensions in a descending order: first the world, then others, then self. But first, the scene.

In Jerusalem there is a pool which the Hebrews called Bethzatha, or Bethesda, or Bethsaida. Five porticos—porches with roofs supported by columns—serve as entrances into the pool area. As the scene opens in John 5, there emerges a startling sight: on each porch there are hundreds of invalids—blind, lame, paralyzed—groping, shoving, pushing toward the entrance of the pool, a human swarm crowding into the tiny opening all at the same time. The density of people is so thick that the identity of each individual is lost. The mood of the mob is intense and nervous, like runners fidgeting at the starting line: *like greyhounds in the slip, straining upon the start*,<sup>1</sup> waiting for the gun to fire and the race to begin. To every person one thing is crucial: to be the first to race through one of those porticos and then to be the first to jump into the pool. For these are the

terms of the legend: at certain seasons of the year an angel of the Lord comes down and stirs up the water of the pool, and whoever steps into the pool first after the water has been stirred up will be healed of whatever disease or debilitating condition he or she has.

Along the edge of all this furor comes Jesus of Nazareth, and there on the periphery of the crashing, crushing crowd, Jesus' gaze falls upon a man who has been paralyzed and bedridden for thirty-eight years, no doubt pleading for assistance. Imagine the absurdity of his pleas: he is wanting someone to pick him up and beat the clamoring crowd to the pool just at the right moment. Perhaps it was his loud cry, or his weeping, or his desperation that caused Jesus to notice him among the faceless mass. Perhaps it was the utter hopelessness of the paralyzed man's request that stirred compassion in Jesus. Whatever the dynamic, Jesus approaches the paralytic, stands over him, and asks this question: "Do you want to be healed?"

### Responsible for the World

*Ecce homo*: behold the man, the central figure in this compelling drama! Here—at the pool called Bethzatha—in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, we behold the man who is the Savior of the world, whose sole mission, whose singular intent is to redeem the whole world, not just the Jews or the Semitic portion of the world but the whole world; not just the rich and sophisticated but the whole world; not just the poor and downtrodden but the whole world. As we stand on this side of history—on this side of the crucifixion and the resurrection—our perspective from this vantage point confirms our view that he is the Christ, that the nature of Jesus' mission was to enter into the world to seek and save the lost, to bring salvation to all people, to exercise responsibility for the world that all may have life and have it more abundantly. His demeanor, will, and action model both the mandate and the momentum of caring for the world.

So where a Nazi death machine, systematically designed and methodically managed, dehumanizes and destroys six million Jews, Jesus has already modeled the mandate for his disciples to enter into that inhumane world and dismantle that machine. When genocide rears its ugly head like a hissing cobra in Darfur or Rwanda or Kosovo, Jesus has already modeled the mandate for his disciples to enter into that inhumane world and attend to the disenfranchised. When earthquakes decimate Haiti, or when hunger ravages vast populations, or when water is needed in Uganda, or when educational facilities are envisioned at Hekima Place in Kenya, Jesus has already modeled the mandate for his disciples to enter into that world of need and attend to his people.

*He has the whole world in his hands,*<sup>ii</sup> and he passes the care of that world on to us. He calls for our collective mind to engage in a collective action for a collective benefit and a universal result.

We are responsible for the world . . . a heavy thought.

### Responsible for Others

Focus your attention now, if you will, on the man who has been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. The most remarkable dynamic here is that no one pays any attention to him. Everyone is intent on getting to the pool first. Pushing and shoving one another though they most assuredly are, touching and elbowing one another as they inevitably must, ironically there is no connection among them, no recognition of their common humanity, no acknowledgement that they all belong to the universal family of man, that is, that each is born of a woman.

On Sunday, March 21, I made reference to Dostoyevsky's work titled *The House of the Dead*, which is a fictionalized account of his experience in a Siberian prison. In a particular episode, which takes place in the prison hospital, Alexander Petrovich witnesses the death of a young man wasted by the common disease of consumption. Mikhailov was only twenty-five, tall, thin, extremely good-looking, though emaciated. It was terrible to see that long thin body with its arms and legs withered away to the bone. All that remained on his body was a wooden cross and his fetters. The sergeant of the guard came in, followed by two warders. He approached the corpse, walking more and more slowly, and when he was about a yard away he stopped dead as though suddenly abashed. The sight of the completely naked, withered corpse, wearing nothing but its chains, made a deep impression on him, and he suddenly unfastened his sword-belt, took off his helmet and made the sign of the cross broadly over the young man Mikhailov. Chekunov, a grey-haired man standing close by, looked steadfastly into the sergeant's face, and drawing the sergeant's attention again to the corpse, Chekunov—with a contorted, trembling lower lip—said deliberately, "He too had a mother." These words pierced through Alexander Petrovich like a needle, and he wondered why Chekunov had said them, what had put those words into his head?

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We suspect we know why Chekunov had said them. It was because being born of a mother is the common denominator of all human beings. It is the common human experience. It is that one experience—having a mother—that ties us inextricably to every other human being here and now, throughout past history, and in all time to come. Look at anyone in any given moment, in any given circumstance, and we can say authentically and reliably, *She too had a mother; he too had a mother*. That acknowledgement alone—in and of itself—informs us that we are responsible for others.

Last week, one of our members sent me an email with *Sojourners* articles attached. The first entry was a quotation from *USA Today*, which recently reported that Hugo Tale-Yax was stabbed while attempting to rescue a woman from an attacker, and as he lay dying on the New York City sidewalk, two dozen people walked by without stopping or calling for help. Hugo's brother Rolando made the following observation: *Any animal that is hurt on the street, the city or anybody walking by goes to rescue it. But in this case, he (Hugo) saved this woman's life, and where was the conscience of the people around him? They have to realize that it could be a member of their family who is the next victim*. To that I beg to add: *Hugo too had a mother*. This very thought should cauterize our common humanity and inspire us to spring to his aid.

The man paralyzed for thirty-eight years? He too had a mother. "Do you want to be healed?" asks Jesus, the only one who related to him. *Jesus is the man for others, the one in whom Love has completely taken over, the one who is utterly open to, and united with, the Ground of his being . . . the one who brings God completely<sup>iv</sup> to bear upon the paralyzed man's desperate condition*. If Jesus is our paradigm for interpersonal relationships, it becomes perfectly clear and undeniable that we are responsible for others.

### *Responsible for Self*

Finally, the third dimension of responsibility: responsibility for self.

Listen once more to the question Jesus poses to the man lying upon his pallet: *Do you want to be healed?* Actually, the question seems absolutely absurd. What kind of crazy question is this? A man who has been paralyzed for thirty-eight years lies at one of the porticoes every season that the waters are stirred, begging for help. Jesus approaches him and asks, "Do you want to be healed?"

How would you or I answer a question like that? *For heaven's sake, man, have you no eyes? or Are you out of your mind? Of course I want to be healed! I've been lying here paralyzed for thirty-eight years, and if you have any doubt that I want to be cured, you are sorely mistaken!* Yet the paralyzed man didn't answer the way one would expect. Rather: *Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.*

Now we understand! This man has been making excuses for his life all these thirty-eight years. He has never taken responsibility for his own existence. It has always been someone else's fault for his condition. *It is my parents' fault that I was born like this, or it is the crowd's fault that I cannot be healed: I have no one to put me into the water, and while I am trying to get to the pool, others shove me out of the way and beat me to it.* Jesus asks, *Do you want to be made well?* In effect Jesus poses the query: *Do you want to be healed...I mean do you really want to be healed, or would you prefer to go on making excuses for yourself?* Now the question makes sense to us!

Jesus invites him: *Rise, stand up, take up your mat and walk!*  
At once the man was healed, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

This Jesus, this healer of human life, looked very much like any other man: a cultivated beard, a seamless tunic, dusty feet in leather sandals. Who would have suspected that he was the power of God for salvation? While the crowds focused their attention and hopes on a pool of stagnant water, the living water was in their midst, the power of God for salvation, for wholeness and life-giving meaning. It was only the power of God that could bathe the paralyzed man with a sense of accountability. After thirty-eight years, the paralyzed man seized the day by seizing responsibility for his own life.

A few years ago a 1960s activist declared with an enlightened tone: *We were great critics. We complained that our society didn't provide us with adequate spiritual nourishment. We rejected established religions. We criticized the nation's leaders. We expressed contempt for our teachers. We never thought of ourselves as responsible for anything. They were responsible—always the unidentified They, the invisible ones who ran society. Our only responsibility was to see through their hypocrisies and complain. It was a great excuse for doing nothing. I count the beginning of my maturity from the day I began to see the childishness of all that. I decided to accept accountability for my world—to the limit of reality.*<sup>v</sup>

At some juncture in every person's life must come the decision to seize the day by claiming personal responsibility for one's own life.

### Conclusion

Each of us is our mother's child. On this Mother's Day, as the Body of Christ in this place, the future is within our reach; there lies before us a world of *dreams, so various, so beautiful, so new.*  
<sup>vi</sup> One thing is certain: the Christ who calls us to discipleship calls us to take full responsibility for ourselves, for one another, and for the world he has given us to love. Let us rise, take up our responsibilities, and walk confidently into a new era.

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's (Pittsburgh's) green and pleasant land.*<sup>vii</sup>

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Mother's Day, May 9, 2010**

### *Notes*

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- <sup>i</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, III, 1, l. 31  
<sup>ii</sup> Words from a Negro Spiritual of the same title  
<sup>iii</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The House of the Dead*, Part Two, *The Hospital (1)*, p 222  
<sup>iv</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 76 and 73  
<sup>v</sup> Former Sixties activist quoted in John Gardner's *Morale*  
<sup>vi</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Dover Beach*, l. 36  
<sup>vii</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, stanza 4