

Sanctifying the Differently Abled

SERMON · Crossing Every Boundary: God's Love for All People · 8 October 2017 (Sanctity of Life: Differently Abled)

John 5:1-9 (John 5:6-8 quoted)

John 4:14 (quoted)

Mark 10:46-52

Genesis 3:14-19

Romans 8:21-22

Revelation 20-21

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

The theme for today's meditation is 'Sanctifying the Differently Abled,' as prescribed by the Church of South India. I want to settle the definitions first, so that we clearly understand what we are meditating on.

In Christian theology, sanctification is a state of being set aside for the glory of God. All believers enter into this state when they are born from above; in other words, when they become part of the Kingdom of Jesus. We are sanctified when we are justified before Jesus, and justification here would refer to the inauguration of a life of faith in Jesus Christ and its final consummation in salvation. The believer's present, justified Christian existence is thus our walk with Jesus towards acquittal from sin and citizenship in Christ's New Creation.

People who are afflicted with different physical or mental impediments are generally considered 'disabled.' These are people who are maimed, deaf and dumb, blind, mentally ill, and suffer from a whole lot of maladies. However, the first thing that comes to mind when labelling someone as 'disabled' is the action itself. In doing that, such people are looked down upon as lesser human beings. While there exist varying degrees of disablement, it is quite inappropriate to label anyone as 'disabled.' Who they are as a person is not affected by their medical condition. More importantly, it surely does not impair their identity in Christ. The more appropriate expression would be 'differently abled,' as this expression is inclusive and offers an equal platform to all. Would you agree with me if I say that you and I are differently abled, though we may not be maimed physically or mentally ill? We are. At the same time, all of us are equal in Jesus, for we are created in His image.

God created the universe and human beings perfect, that is, in a sanctified state. Everything and everyone functioned flawlessly until Adam and Eve believed Satan's lies. The Fall threw the human race and the universe into a state of dysfunction (Genesis 3:14-19). However,

neither was so distorted by the Fall as to obliterate or defeat God's original purpose and design. Nothing could change God's plans. Fallen human beings still bear God's image (James 3:9-10). Fallen creation still witnesses to God's existence and attributes (Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:20). Yet both, depending on the analogy employed, are skewed, broken, fallen, dysfunctional, and therefore not sanctified. The creation groans, awaiting its sanctification, when everything will be set right (Romans 8:21-22; Revelation 20-21).

Human beings, made in God's image, were the pinnacle and focus of His creation. The sanctification of human beings, therefore, is the highest goal of God's work in the universe. God explicitly declared it to be His will (1 Thessalonians 4:3). The Gospel accounts describe around thirty-seven miracles of Jesus, by one common reckoning, though counts vary somewhat between sources depending on how the four Gospels' accounts are combined and counted; of these, over twenty-five are miracles of healing people who suffer from different maladies.

Thirty-eight years is a long time to sit on your mat. Every day is the same. Waiting, watching, and hoping. Not much changes. Sitting on his mat has become a way of life for the man in today's Gospel passage, read to us from John 5:1-9. His life is stagnant. He is unable to see that the deep well of life is right within him. Instead, he is convinced that life will bubble up outside of him, over there, in that magic pool of water. So, he sits on his mat, waiting, watching, and hoping that things will change someday. He is hoping that someone will put him in the water as soon as the bubbling starts. He is living an 'as soon as' life.

The life outside of us is an illusion. It convinces us that our life is nothing more than our circumstances. It deceives us into believing that life is to be found outside ourselves. It tricks us into living an 'as soon as' life. We say to ourselves, or maybe even to others, "As soon as this or that happens, everything will be better," or "I will do this or that..." The pool of Bethesda has a strong attraction for all of us. Children often say, "As soon as I grow up, I am out of school..." It continues throughout our life. "As soon as ..." I graduate, get a better job; I get married; I have more time, more money; it goes on and on, and the list is infinite. The problem is there will always be another pool of Bethesda. Meanwhile, life has been put on hold. We sit on our mat, self-imprisoned by the circumstances of our life. The imprisonment is so great that when Jesus asks the man, "Wilt thou be made whole?" (John 5:6), there was no spontaneous "Yes" from him, a person who has been waiting for thirty-eight years to be healed! Amazing, isn't it? He seems, of all those Jesus healed, among the least eager and the least grateful. Instead, he offers circumstances and excuses: "Sir, I have no man, when the

water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me” (John 5:7). I am not suggesting that the circumstances of our lives are irrelevant or have no effect. That is just not true. They do affect us. We are, however, more than the circumstances of our lives; they are peripheral to us. Life is not to be found outside our situations or circumstances, but within them.

Jesus does not help the man get into the water. Jesus comes to him on his mat, the same mat and situation the man so wants to escape, and speaks words of life and resurrection: “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk” (John 5:8). The man does not leave his mat behind. It goes with him. His circumstances are real. The difference is he now carries them. They no longer carry him. He stands sanctified.

I want to contrast this man with Bartimaeus, whom I describe as the ‘blind man with twenty-ten vision.’ An oxymoronic statement, but true. They say that there is no one as blind as he who will not see, or he who refuses to see. I suppose you will agree with me that there are many people walking around in this world today whose eyes work just fine, yet they cannot seem to see that they are headed the wrong way, towards eternal damnation. In Mark's account, chapter 10:46-52, we are presented with a man who was totally blind. Bartimaeus could see nothing with his physical eyes; he was perhaps born blind, yet he could see things on a spiritual level that others were blind to. As Jesus passed by, not wanting to give up an opportunity to be sanctified, Bartimaeus cried out loudly for Jesus to heal him. He received healing that day, not just physical but spiritual too.

Jesus does not change our outer circumstances. He changes us. He calls us to a new way of being, seeing, acting, speaking, and thinking. When we stand and rise to that new life, we will discover that our circumstances have somehow changed. The pool of Bethesda is drained of its power over us. There is freedom where there was once imprisonment. Apathy gives way to creativity. Once stagnant waters now bubble with new life. That is the sanctification Jesus offers us. Jesus had said, “Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst” (John 4:14).

The life Jesus offers does not happen “as soon as....” It happens in this place, at this time, in these circumstances. Are you sitting on your mat? Are you looking for a pool of Bethesda? “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.” May Jesus bless you for that. Amen.

*God of life, Who loves justice and graciously sanctifies each life, shower Your grace on all who are weak, tormented, persecuted, insulted, paralysed, and are mentally and physically challenged, and teach us to be gracious, so that all those who suffer physical and mental challenges may live their life in dignity and sanctity, through Jesus Christ, Who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forevermore.
Amen.*