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An Encouraging Word

John 5:8

The Book of Revelation is a vision which comes to people who are living with very difficult circumstances. It was a moment in history when Roman officials needed a scapegoat to assume the blame for all the failures of the Roman system. Because the church was a powerless minority with which most people were unfamiliar, it was an obvious target for blame. All of the resources of Roman power were directed against it. There was no reason to believe that the church had any chance to survive this relentless campaign against it. This was a time of extreme insecurity for this community of faith. But in the 21st and 22nd chapters of Revelation, the vision which is presented is one of complete security. It is the vision of a city where no one is threatened and no one lives in fear. But most of all it is a city where God is fully present to give and sustain life. The vision is intended to encourage the church to look beyond the circumstances which it cannot control and to live by the promise of wholeness.

In the 5th chapter of the gospel of John we find Jesus offering the same kind of encouragement. Jesus has an encounter with a man who has no friends and no family. He has been ill for 38 years. We don't know the man's name or what his illness was. But he has been sitting beside a pool of healing for all these years unable to move fast enough to compete for a place in the water.

The man is surprised when a stranger strikes up a conversation with him. He is not accustomed to having people take an interest in his personal situation. His sense of surprise turns into confusion as the conversation progresses. The man thinks that the conversation is about the pool and how many people are elbowing each other out to get into it. He thinks they are talking about how hopeless his case is since there is no one to help him get into the water in time to benefit from it. Suddenly he discovers that Jesus is talking about something else. Jesus is talking not about illness but about wholeness. Jesus doesn't care to dwell on the circumstances of this man's life. He wants to offer the promise of wholeness. He invites the man to pick up his bed and walk. He tells the man to forget about the pool; forget about the long lines; forget about the waiting. Wholeness is possible now.

In the aftermath of my mother's death a few weeks ago I have been sorting the materials taken from her apartment. One of the items that caught my attention is a brief memoir of her life that she wrote in 1996. Reading this helped me to appreciate once again some of the formative experiences of her life. One of these was the sudden death of her mother when she was in seventh grade in Hutchinson, Kansas. Her father tried to hire someone to be a cook and housekeeper but he was never successful in finding anyone who would stay. This meant that my mother had to assume a good deal of responsibility for the care of her younger brother and sister. This rearranged not only her family life but also her relationships at school. Her junior high principal gave permission for her to leave school every day at 11:30 a.m. to prepare lunch for her younger siblings and to walk them to their schools. Then at 2:00 p.m. she would return to her classes. As a result her classmates were reminded daily that she carried this special burden.

One of my mother's classmates, William Stafford, grew up to be a well known poet. Many years later he published a poem based on his memory of her circumstances. It reads in part:

Girl in the front row who had no mother
and went home every day to get supper
the class became silent when you left early.

Elaborate histories were in our book
but of all the races you were the good:
the taxes of Rome were at your feet.

When the bell rang we did not write any more.
Traitor to everything else, we poured
to the fountain, I bent and thought of you
("At Liberty School," from *Traveling Through the Dark*).

The words of the poet express the brokenness of my mother's life which everyone could see and she could not change. To her classmates she became the "girl in the front row who had no mother."

But what my mother remembered best about those years and wrote about in her memoir was the encouragement she received from a teacher. This woman helped my mother to look beyond her circumstances. This was a woman who never married and had no children of her own. She never taught my mother. But she made it a practice to identify a certain number of students each year who she thought would benefit from encouragement of one kind or another. She always worked behind the scenes and remained anonymous. Sometimes she provided financial assistance or helped with college tuition. But in the case of my mother the need was not financial but emotional. Every day she left something in my mother's locker. One day it would be candy or a treat of some kind. Another day it would be a personal note of encouragement. Another day it would be an inspirational message. The purpose of these gifts was clear. She was teaching my mother not to dwell on the circumstances of her life that she could not change. She was encouraging her to find joy in the opportunities of the future. She made it possible for a frightened teenager to embrace the promise of wholeness.

Like the broken man who was stuck beside the pool my mother never asked for help. She didn't really know what she needed. The grace extended by her anonymous friend was more than she could have imagined. And so it is with the grace that Jesus offers to us. "Stand up, take up your mat and walk (John 5:8)."