

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

THE POOL OF HEALING
Sermon for Easter 6C-Jn 5:1-9
LPC, 5/5/13

One of the things I like a lot about the Episcopal Church is that there's not, usually, any shouting or carrying on during worship. As a bonus, we don't sing many of those hymns about how warm and fuzzy God makes me feel. (My older son refers to those as "Jesus-Is-My-Boyfriend Music.")

My aversion to over-emotional worship stems not from being raised Episcopalian, but probably at least partly from being raised Congregationalist and New England Yankee. I was also encouraged, from an early age, and from the culture surrounding me, to always use my head, especially where the important stuff is concerned.

This is fine so far as it goes. But if intellect were sufficient for understanding God, then the smartest people would be the godliest people, which is clearly not the case. If there were such a thing as Holiness Quotient, you can bet it would not coincide directly with IQ.

If God could be comprehended by the mind, God would not be God. As Henri Nouwen said, "Theological formation is the gradual and often painful discovery of God's incomprehensibility. You can be competent in many things, but you can't be competent in God."

However, God continues to try to draw us close. And as we try to respond and approach God we look for words and ways to describe and experience God. Some of the best of these are not intellectual.

Because of my intellectual bias, it took me a long time in my own spiritual journey to trust this truth. Letting go of intellectual analysis and reasonable skepticism carries with it the possibility of loss of control or overindulgence, which I suppose I will always fear. However, my desire for God is greater than my fear. So I take guidance from people whom tradition and history have validated as saints.

One of these is St. Ignatius of Loyola, who taught a kind of meditation that depends upon the imagination. In Ignatian prayer, one imagines oneself inside the Holy Scriptures, as a character in the Gospels, interacting with Jesus and other New Testament characters.

In beginning Ignatian meditation, it is helpful to have a guide: someone who can walk you through the steps, and encourage you to use your imagination to enter the Scripture with all of your senses: sight, smell, taste, hearing and feeling. This is called, unsurprisingly enough, "guided meditation."

I am moved to share all this with you today because today's Gospel from John has been an extremely fruitful one for me, in my experience of Ignatian meditation. This

passage has particular application when healing is needed, either for oneself or someone one loves.

I am going to read you a guided meditation based on this passage written by Carolyn Stahl. If we were actually doing this meditation and I were guiding you, I would read it much more slowly so that you could take your time to follow the directions, to truly entering the scene with your imagination and glean your own wisdom from the experience. But for now I just want you to get an idea of how guided meditation works.

Sit quietly and take a few slow, deep breaths... Allow the tension in your body to be released... Imagine yourself by a pool of water... Notice what people are with you as you are beside this pool... Now become aware of your own body and of a particular area which you would like to be more healthy... Observe the Christ walking toward you, sitting down beside you, and asking you what you are doing. You respond, telling the Christ why you are there... Christ asks you if you want to be made whole... Feel free to interact. Communicate in any way that feels right for you ... Decide with the Christ what you are going to do... You may simply get up, affirm your wholeness, and walk on home. Or you, may move into the water and swim around, splashing, and feeling the wholeness cleansing and healing your body. Or, you may come to understand some guidance... Let yourself finish this scene as feels right for you. Stay in touch with the quality of health and wholeness that surrounds the water in this pool, the faith and conviction that you and Christ share... Know that you can return to this setting in your imagination whenever you want... When you are ready, open your eyes.

(It may be helpful to write down your reflections when you are finished.)

In another version of this meditation, you bring a friend or loved one who needs healing to the pool to meet Jesus, and imagine their interaction. This has been a particularly helpful meditation for me when someone I love has been suffering greatly, and all I can do is pray. When all you can do is pray, this is a good way to pray.

I can well understand if anyone is turned off by this approach to prayer. But what do you do when you want to be made well? You find yourself doing all kinds of things that ordinarily turn you off: going to the doctor, taking off your clothes in a strange room, subjecting yourself to painful tests and therapies, taking unpleasant drugs with strange side effects.

The type of meditation I have introduced here is not the only way to be made well, of course. But all healing ultimately comes from the same source. And as we see here in this Gospel passage from John, that Source, Jesus, is generous with healing, even when, like the paralytic in the story, we don't even know how to ask for it.

What a haunting question: "Do you want to be made well?" Jesus asks it still.