

“This is about receiving” John 5:1-9

1 After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. 3 In these lay a multitude of invalids-- blind, lame, and paralyzed. [4] 5 One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" 7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." 9 And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath. (John 5:1-9 ESV)

Grace and peace to you all from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Sometimes you are reading the Gospel narrative and wondering – why did the evangelist put these things here? The same we could ask about this story. We know that Jesus healed everyone who was brought before Him for healing. Why would John include in his gospel account this particular healing?

Let’s, first, take a look at what we can find out about this event, and about the people involved in it. Second, let’s see whether this event has any implications for us today.

First, about this event. It is unusual that John doesn’t even explain what a festival it is, and why Jesus had come to Jerusalem. The only fact that is known - He was there for a feast of the Jews.

There was the pool called Bethesda, and there were also beliefs related with this pool. As the legend went, from time to time an angel came down to this pool and touched its surface.

Whoever was the first to immerse himself into the pool, when it was stirred up, this person was healed. Beliefs like these were quite common in the ancient world. In fact, they probably still are pretty common in many places.

This was the reason why multitudes of “blind, lame, and paralyzed” were lying near the pool. They all were waiting for the angel to come down and give them a chance for the healing.

There was also this man, who had been sick already for 38 years, laying and waiting for a miracle to happen. There is a certain amount of information we can gather about him. To be honest, we have to admit that, probably, he wasn't the nicest guy we can think off.

He is there, at the pool, superstitiously waiting for some kind of a miracle to happen. First, we should be quite critical about his expectations. Why would one believe these stories? That's just a foolish superstition.

He's been sick for 38 years and he still keep believing these fairy tales. Moreover, even if he kept believing these tales, there was no one, who would help him to get to the pool.

It is not just being superstitious, that's also being not too smart. What is a point to be there if you cannot even get to the water! The fact that he didn't have anyone to help him in this important moment, it also tells something about this man.

We can read it a little later in the same chapter, that when Jesus had healed him, and he was asked by the Jews, who did it, he didn't even know Jesus name. He didn't care to ask, who was the one, who made him well again.

When later Jesus met him in the temple, He said: "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." (John 5:14 ESV) It means that also his sickness could be related with some kind of sinful behavior.

Do you know, what this man did later? He went to the Jews, who were persecuting Jesus, and said that it was Jesus who healed him. Strange man, indeed.

This man may not be the one, whom we would like to have as our acquaintance, but what happen with him is really encouraging for us. For our God it doesn't matter what kind of people we are. There are no pre-requisites for us to have His full attention to our needs.

We don't have to be friendly, we don't have to be smart, we don't have to be perfect, we don't have to be good citizens, etc. We can be sick, foolish sinners without friends, doing our own thing, we can be exactly as we are and where we are, and we will still be important and precious in His eyes.

It is encouraging that God's love and attention to us is not conditioned by who we are and how we perform. He is not picking those, who are really nice people, He is welcoming all of us, whatever we are.

The second thing we are looking at – does this event have any implications for us today? Indeed, it has. And what implications!

The crucial word for us in this passage is the word "Sabbath". John mentions it at the very end of this account. When this event happened "that day was the Sabbath." One word – the Sabbath.

One may wonder? So what? What have we to do with the Sabbath? It belonged to the Old Testament... right? And we are freed from the OT law. We have nothing to do with the Old Testament. One need to be very careful when someone says words like these. There are things that don't pertain to us, but there are things which remain as important as they were, when they were said a long time ago.

When you hear someone saying that this is the OT stuff, that doesn't apply to us, Christians, remember Jesus words, which He repeated again and again in the New Testament: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished." (Mat 5:17-18 ESV)

Sometimes we tend to mix together things which have to be distinguished wisely. Sometime it happens because the Old Testament is too thick to read it and it is easier to say that it doesn't apply to us anymore. Jesus thought differently. "Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law."

Of course, not all were equal. Do we still need to follow the law that says: "When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing." (Ex 21:2 ESV) No? I think you are right.

What about this? "Honor your father and your mother." (Ex 20:12 ESV) Or this: "You shall have no other gods before me!" (Ex 20:3 ESV) Or this: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God." (Ex 20:8-10 ESV) They are essentially affirmed again and again both in the Old and in the New Testament.

All the laws are not the same. There are particular laws which were given to Israel in a particular time. There are universal laws – those about which Jesus says that they will remain until this heaven and earth remain.

These unchanging laws we can call also the order of the Creation, or the intended design of the Creator, or God's holy, eternal and unchanging will. For us this will, this order of Creation was most comprehensively revealed on the mount Sinai, when God Yahweh gave to the Israel the 10 Commandments.

When we talk about the commandments, we have to admit two things. On the one hand, they were given specifically to the Jews and as such they don't directly apply to us. But, on the other hand, they are the best available summary of what Creator's intention for our life is, what is God's design for our life; and as such, no doubt, they are universal and apply also to each of us.

Let's put it this way – the Commandments and all the relations and responsibilities which they imply are the same laws which God worked into the fabric of His creation.

Moreover, when He looked at them on the evening of the sixth day He said with a joy: “They are good, very good!” (Gen 1:31)

Let’s take a look at the Sabbath. This is very interesting fact, but nowhere in the ancient world they had a seven day week. Nowhere! First occurrence of the seven day week is in the Bible, when our God Yahweh establishes it for the sake of Israel.

What was the reason He established the Sabbath? Superficial reading of the third commandment may give an impression that God required this day for Himself. “You can have six days for yourselves, but this one you have to give to me.”

Similar misunderstanding is related to our Sunday. So many believe that the church attendance on Sundays, or other days, when we have the divine service, is something that we owe to God and are commanded to do to please Him.

God’s intentions are far from it. We need to remember this very, very important principle – we cannot give unless we have received. We cannot give love, if we haven’t been loved, we cannot give joy, if we haven’t receive joy, we cannot give knowledge if we haven’t received it, and so on.

When God commands us to keep the Sabbath, this is all about Him giving us. For us it is all about receiving! About learning and practicing how to receive from our generous God. And this is exactly what we can see in today’s gospel account. Jesus generous giving in the Sabbath.

Let’s look once more to what happened in this event and what implications it has for us. The sick man needed the healing. That’s objective need and no one would dispute it. But where was he looking for the help? “Let the angel come and touch the water and maybe then I can get healed.”

But where did he finally get the help? From the angel? From magically stirred water in the pool? No, none of these was able to give him what he needed.

We can see that we, wonderful, but at the same time sinful creatures of God, are not much different than this man. We all have needs. Real needs. And we have our ideas about where and how we can meet these needs.

Take a few examples. We all need to rest, and we all need to work. Often we do it not just to earn money, but to earn some social status, some worth in the society, to be able to match those criterions which culture is setting for us, to be able to feel useful.

Sometimes we even identify ourselves with what we do or with what we have achieved. That may even become our core identity. We all have also social needs; to be together with others, to be respected, and the list goes on.

These all are real needs. There is no doubt about it. The biggest question is – where are we looking for a solution? Are we looking, so to speak, at the pool, waiting when the angel comes down and delivers to us what we need, or somewhere else?

It was the Sabbath, when Jesus gave this man what he needed. Our God is quite clear explaining why He commands us the Sabbath, the day of rest which now, in the NT time, usually is hold on the Sunday. It is not for Him, it is for us. Setting this one day apart is not something our God would benefit from. No.

Don't forget. He created time. All time belongs to Him. Whole creation is His. He doesn't need to get something back from us. He commands the day of rest for two reasons.

First, because He is our Creator, and He wants to provide for our physical needs, and He wants us to trust to Him as to our Creator. Second, because He is our Savior, He wants to take care of our spiritual need, and He wants us to trust and rely to Him as to our Redeemer.

As we saw from today's gospel account, and as we know from elsewhere in the Scriptures, Jesus knows everything. He knows our needs. Not just those which we imagine to be the most important, but also those, which really are the most essential for us. He wants to provide for us.

When God sets one day apart as the day of rest, He invites us to stop from our efforts and to realize that He is our Creator, that He is our God. That ultimately He is the One, who grants us everything we need. By giving us this one day of rest, He wants to remind us, that He cares about us. That ultimately our needs can be met only in Him and by Him and nowhere else.

We need a rest, and He gives it to us not just in one, but in many ways. He gives us physical rest when we cease from our efforts and stop for a day to recover. We also need to remember that our God is the source of all life. There couldn't be a better way to replenish ourselves as to be with Him, as to receive Him in the Holy Communion.

He also gives us emotional rest. When we are exhausted worrying about our daily issues, trying to figure out how to make everything happen, He kindly invites us to relax and to entrust our concerns to Him. He is in control of everything. He knows what we need. He has all the means to give it to us. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Mat 11:28 ESV)

Jesus gives us also spiritual rest. We can get tired and frustrated and depressed, when we work so hard to establish our identity and worthiness by our achievements, when we are spending so much energy trying to justify our existence and proving to the world that we are something.

Our God created us in His image, and Jesus makes us the children of God. There is no higher and more precious identity, there is nothing that could make us more worthy than this, - being the children of God. Being a part of His royal family. Our God doesn't require us to strive hard to achieve it. He gives it as a gift, we just need to stop and to learn to receive and to appreciate it.

We have our social needs. Unfortunately so often many of our relations are defined by our desire to be something, or to get something. If I can belong to this group of people, it would be something special. It would show what I have achieved.

On our Sabbath day, whichever day of the week we celebrate it, Jesus invites us and says: "You are the child of the Most Highest. You are the member of My family. There is nothing you need to prove, we love you, we accept you, we want to care for you, not because of what you have achieved, but because you are important member of our family." Each of you.

This is what our Sabbath is about. *It is about receiving.* About receiving abundantly from our God, who is almost prodigal in His generosity. Because everything, everything belongs to Him.

We don't need to wait for "38 years" hoping that, if we work hard, one day we may get into the water, stirred by the angel, and then our needs will be fulfilled.

Our God invites us today. Stop, take a rest in my presence, and I'll give you everything you truly need.

This is our Sabbath; the day when we stop and rest in the presence of our God.

Come and receive His gifts!

Amen.