

**Cool Water**  
**“Jesus takes you to the water.”**  
**John 5:1-9a**

Rev. John H. Hice  
September 4, 2011  
First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

**Tears**

Downtown Royal Oak was already alive.

Restaurants and bars filled to overflowing; diners sat at tables set in sidewalk corrals. Lighted signs pierced through a gathering dusk. Others on benches were still on their cell phones; some concluded business transactions. Others were telling where they could be found.

Dog walkers smiled. Laughter rose among groups that blocked sidewalks so you'd have to weave around raised tree beds and meters to pass. Cars moved by honking, mostly to just say "Hi."

It was a city of people enjoying happiness and relationship. There was something freeing about it.

Except at this corner building, sitting on its steps – there was a young woman holding a cell phone in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Alone. She'd just said something sharp on the phone. But now she just stared down, or out as she sighed out a sad cloud of smoke. And though I didn't look more than a quick, passing moment, I could tell she had tears in her eyes.

With a city filled with friends joined together – the look of freedom everywhere – you could tell that she was not free. A relationship on the rocks, a criticizing parent, a problem at work, a bad doctor's report:: whatever it was, it had her cornered, alone, chained down.

I wonder how many others were like her, even behind their appearance. Locked up by something: really in chains.

## Way to Freedom

Jerusalem might have been having *its* Arts Beats and Eats. Some festival. And Jesus was there. The story goes: he was walking near a pool crowded with people who were broken. Bethsaida. It's said that every once in a while, and without explanation the water would bubble, like something invisible stirred it up – and that's when people believed they needed to get into the pool because that's when they could be healed. Whatever troubled the water, they thought, had the power to mend their bodies. But lots of them couldn't move on their own, so they needed friends waiting with them who'd take them when the time was right, and put them in.

And Jesus walked among them.

One guy had been there 38 years. Whatever it was that had him sick and unable to walk was chronic and permanent.<sup>1</sup> And Jesus knew that he'd been there a long time.

"Do you want to get well?" Jesus asked. Of course he did. And the guy told Jesus how he had no one to help him. So, every time the water stirred up, others would bump their way ahead of him in line and he'd never had the chance.

In many ways he was like the woman on the steps: afflicted and alone. Something was holding him down and holding him back. It was like he was in chains; probably also in tears.

Jesus knew. Just like he'd known Nathaniel – one of his disciples – before they even met. Just like he knew the woman at the well and could tell her of her life and her brokenness.<sup>2</sup> Jesus has a way of knowing us and what we need; which tells us *God knows and God cares*. So he told the man who'd been unable to walk to get up, pick up the mat he'd been lying on, and walk.

Have you ever noticed that when something's got you really down – that even more destructive than the problem itself is the isolation that seems always to come with it? Either people sense the tension and stay away, or you push them out, or you don't have the energy to ask. You're alone. And the loneliness itself locks you up.

Jesus came and was with the man by the pool. Jesus knew. And God knows us and races to our side. Even when no one else is there, God can ease us in the water when it's all stirred up.

If we allow it.

*O sinners, let's go down, let's go down, come on down.  
O sinners let's go down, down to the river to pray.*

Black spirituals were born out of the suffering and hope of people in American bondage during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Taken from homes mostly in West Africa, they were held against their will, often separated from their families, forced to work without pay. They were forbidden to meet together, even and maybe especially for worship.

But they knew about Jesus. They knew about his healing and peace and his good news of justice and freedom. But they also knew that his promise was not just pie in the sky, wait until the end of history or until you die. They knew that the salvation Jesus offered was every bit as much for our life-here-and-now.

So their songs emerged: A “uniquely African response to an institution that tried to annihilate their (culture)” as it held them in bondage.<sup>3</sup> These tunes carried both a spiritual, ultimate message and, at the same time, a kind of secret code that announced their autonomy, encouraged resistance, and conveyed messages about plans to meet for underground worship or even escape.

*Swing low, sweet chariot comin' for to carry me home*

could tell the people that the Underground Railroad “conductor” was coming soon: so pay attention.

*Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus,  
Steal away, steal away home, I ain't got long to stay here*

could announce a secret worship service in the woods or an escape.

*Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children.  
Wade in the water. God gonna' trouble the water.*

also meant to say: “When you escape and are trying to get to the next relay point on the Underground Railroad, make certain you wade in the river’s water to throw the bloodhounds off your scent.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus’ world had some of the worst oppression history had ever seen; and he said, “The Realm of God is at hand. Let go of the old stuff that holds you down and believe in the new freedom. Live it.” So he lived among us: releasing all us captives and showing the Way of a loving God who gives peace and justice to everyone.

Even a whole population of people carried off into slavery thousands of miles from home.

Even someone who's been waiting alone by a healing pool for 38 years.

Even someone who's been suffering a hurt since childhood.

Even someone who's been carrying the weight of guilt over something stupid they did years before.

Even a woman sitting on the steps in downtown Royal Oak.

Even you.

To all of us he says, "I'll take you to the water. From here on, I'll make you free and whole.

The chains get broken in Jesus.

### **Up to Your Knees**

Have you ever gone in? Have you ever slipped off your shoes on a hot day and ventured across to where hot sand turns cool and wet, then stepped in – waves kissing your knees? Have you ever waded further 'til the clean, cool water gives you complete relief?

Wade in the water. Really, come to Jesus. It's where he'll dry your tears and set you free.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gail R. O'Day. "The Gospel of John," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 578.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mellonee V. Burnim, African American Music. New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group. © 2006. p 52

<sup>4</sup> "Spirituals as Coded Communication" from The Spirituals Project, a multidisciplinary online curriculum at the University of Denver, Center for Teaching & Learning. © 2004.

<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/freedom/coded.cfm>