SUNDAY OF THE PARALYTIC
May 26

THE GOSPEL READING
John 5:1-15
[A Paralytic Is Healed]

At that time, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda which has five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and troubled the water; whoever stepped in first after the troubling of the water was healed of whatever disease he had. One man was there, who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him and knew that he had been lying there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down before me.” Jesus said to him, “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked.

Now that day was the sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, “It is the sabbath, it is not lawful for you to carry your pallet.” But he answered them, “The man who healed me said to me, ‘Take up your pallet, and walk.’ ” They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your pallet, and walk’?” Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward, Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.” The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.
The Gospel story of the man with paralysis is our story too. We are all in need of healing, and we are incapable of saving ourselves. We need help from others, and ultimately, we need God’s grace.

There was a healing pool on the outskirts of Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate, through which the animals to be sacrificed at the Temple passed. The pool was surrounded by five covered porches from which the water could be accessed. Many sick people with various ailments would lay on the porches, waiting for the water to be stirred up and the medicinal properties from the underground spring to be released. It was believed that an angel of the Lord would come and stir the water, giving it healing power. The first person to step into the stirring water was instantly healed. The pool was called Bethesda — which means “house of mercy” — because of the healing of many who suffered.

Jesus is in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. He sees a man with paralysis by the pool who has suffered for 38 years. Jesus has compassion for him and asks: “Do you want to be healed?” Saint John Chrysostom says that Jesus does not ask this question for Himself. He does so to bring to light the great patience of the man, who for 38 years had sat by the pool with the hope of being healed. The man answers: “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going another steps down before me.” Jesus responds: “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.” The man is healed at once, and he picks up his bed and leaves.

This healing takes place on the Sabbath (Saturday), the day of rest. The Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath Law. Instead of praising God for the miracle, they condemn Jesus for not honoring the letter of the Law. This reminds us to commit ourselves more to the love of God and His grace than to rules and religious customs. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

The pool is a metaphor for the Mosaic Law, and the man with paralysis is an image of Israel yearning to find salvation in the Law. The man was in his condition for a long time, just as Israel had been waiting for deliverance from their long-awaited Messiah. Angels were said to have stirred the Pool of Bethesda, just as angels were said to have given the Law (Acts 7:53). The pool featured five entrances, just as the Mosaic Law (the Pentateuch) had five books. Christ is the embodiment and fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, and “by His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

Only one of the many sick and disabled at Bethesda is healed by the Lord. Although Jesus has compassion for all, the Lord directs his attention to the one who had no one to help him. The man with paralysis represents each and every one of us. We all
become spiritually paralyzed by the weight of our sins and our shortcomings. As the man with paralysis needed to be healed, we desperately need healing. As the man was unable to get to the waters himself, we also need Christ to help us.

Our healing begins with faith. The man with paralysis had waited for 38 years because others would get to the waters when stirred before he could. Still, he perseveres in faith. Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed because free will is always involved in God’s miracles. God’s love initiates the giving of His Grace, but it is up to us to respond freely by accepting His Grace. The love God offers humanity cannot be reconciled with force or pressure. Love is only compatible with freedom and trust. Christ knows the exact condition of the man with paralysis, but He still asks him if he wants to be healed. Christ knows the exact condition of each and every one of us, but He still asks us if we truly want salvation.

Later, Jesus finds the man in the Temple and says, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.” The Lord’s instruction draws attention to the underlying condition of the paralysis — the relationship between suffering and sin. As the Gospel story demonstrates, our bodies and souls are interconnected. The health of our body, mind, and spirit are interdependent. A spiritual problem may have physical consequences, and physical problems may cause psychological or spiritual issues.

The Church, like a hospital, offers holistic treatment for all that afflicts us in body and soul. Through personal prayer — especially the Jesus Prayer and the Psalter (Book of Psalms) — the Divine Liturgy, and most of all, the Holy Sacraments, we receive the medicine of God’s grace.

The healing waters in the Pool of Bethesda are a symbol of Baptism. But where the waters of Bethesda cured physical ailments, Baptism cures those of the soul. But even after our Baptism, we still experience the paralysis caused by sin and need further healing. Confession — which is called “a second baptism” — is where we are healed by God’s grace through our repentance and the absolution prayers read over us by the priest. Holy Unction is the Sacrament of spiritual and physical healing. And it is in the Holy Eucharist that our body and soul are healed by receiving Christ’s Body and Blood.

Like the man with paralysis, the Lord sees us and wants to heal us. As we persevere in faith and participate in the Holy Sacraments of the Church, we will continually receive healing of our soul and body with the promised gift of eternal life.