

Jump into the river of Grace
John 5:1-9

The hero of the American Olympic team this year is Michael Phelps, who won eight gold medals in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. He is the swimmer of the world. He had jumped hundreds and hundreds of times into water for the Olympics and finally won eight gold medals, which stands as an Olympic world record.

Swimming is an exciting sport. But, before knowing how to swim, jumping into water is a very scary and dangerous activity. There are many accidental deaths in water in summertime. However, it remains a popular sport. Many of us may recall scary experiences in the water when first learned how to swim. I learned to swim when I was six years old. Before I knew how to swim, I waded in the water pretending to swim. I remember walking in the water, moving my arms around. But wading and swimming are quite different. Wading is impossible above water deeper than your own height.

Today's scripture readings are all chapter 5's. 2 Kings 5:8-14, Romans 5:18-21 and Gospel John 5:1-9. We read two stories, one in Old Testament and one in New Testament.

Two stories have a similar message about healing related to water. The first story is about Naaman, the Syrian. He was a mighty man of valor, but he was a leper. Mighty man but a leper! That is a paradox in life. This Syrian army general was introduced and led by a slavery girl of Israel to see the man of God. The little girl did not hide her faith in God; she used it.

So Naaman departed and took much treasure with him. Yet the price which Naaman had to pay to be healed of his leprosy was even greater than the worth of his treasures. Money can do much, yet it never yet purchased for a man the healing of his soul, nor the peace of his mind. And Naaman had to travel all the way from Syria to Elisha, the man of God to seek his cure.

Jeroram, the king, received a report that Naaman the Syrian would be visiting Israel, seeking to be healed. He did not know what to do when the message and the gift came from Syria. With all his kingly power, he was powerless. Secular force cannot deal with moral emergency. Only the man of God can assume control. And, the man of God told the Syrian to go and wash in the Jordan seven times.

When Naaman hears Elisha's order to him, he is indignant. His pride is hurt, and he would turn away in disappointed anger. Plenty of people are in the same mood today. The answer is same today as in the day of Naaman. In spite of all that they possess they are really sick at heart, and they know that they are. But to address this sickness demands much of the modern man, just as it did of Naaman. Naaman's servant went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed!' So Naaman conquered his pride, stifled his vanity, and proud soldier went down and dipped seven

times – one dip was not enough – and his flesh became again like unto the flesh of a little boy.

Go right down into the stream of life-giving life of God! Then, our flesh too will become renewed as that of a little child. If each week we bathe our souls in a real Sabbath, and in worship in the sanctuary, if each day we dip into the Bible and know real moments of consecrating prayer, then the miracle will be wrought for us as truly as it was for Naaman. This is the message for us today from this story.

The other story in New Testament is about a man who has waiting for thirty eight years for his healing. This is an exclusive article in the Gospel of John, which it seems the other books of the Gospels could not deal with. This episode is specifically described as to place, time, name, persons, and tradition, which leads us to understand that that was an actual incident.

One day, on the feast of Jews, Jesus went Jerusalem to attend one of the “feasts of obligation.” In biblical times, three Jewish feasts were feasts of obligation: Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. All adult male Jews who lived within fifteen miles of Jerusalem were legally bound to attend these three feasts.

Jesus made his way to the famous pool, where all the people stared with great intensity at the water, waiting expectantly for it to move. Beneath the pool was a subterranean stream that every now and then bubbled up. The belief was that the disturbance was caused by an angel, and the first person to get into the pool after the troubling of the water would be healed. To us, this may sound like superstition. But it was the kind of belief that was widespread in ancient times.

Ancient people were especially impressed with the power and holiness of water. We may know water only as something that comes out of a faucet, but in the ancient world water was the most valuable, the most powerful, most awesome of all things. Surely, this notion was a factor in the origin of the rite of baptism.

The reporter of the Gospel John describes focus in the man in this account. The reporter describes about this man that “He had been ill for thirty-eight years.” When Jesus walked into that intriguing scene, his eye fell immediately upon this pitiful man. All thirty eight years, he had watched, and waited and hoped. And, somehow Jesus knew the man had been there a long time. Jesus approached and asked him, “Do you want to be healed?” And when the lame man answered, “Oh, yes, but I have no one to help me.” Jesus reached out with love and said, “Get up! Take your bed and walk!” and then the man got up and walked away.

Thirty eight years waiting around a pool is no use for healing. We must be able to jump into the pool at the critical moment.

A pastor found a man attending his church. He always sat in the very back, on the last line pews. The pastor approached him and asked him if he would join any activity in the church. The man said, “Oh no. I’m just a visitor in this church.” How long have you

been visiting this church?” the pastor added. “Well, maybe for five or ten years?” he replied. This was a man who had not jumped into the joy of worship. The man who had been watching worship on the sidelines for long time, is the man who was waiting around at the pool.

Austrian novelist Franz Kafka tells a parable about a man who waited all his life outside a door. He looked the door wistfully and longed to enter. He watched the door keeper and wondered how to get past him and through the door. He plotted and strategized, schemed and planned, but was afraid to try. Finally he gave up, tried, disappointed, and disillusioned.

As the man was dying, he said to the doorkeeper, “Why? Why did you keep me out?” “I didn’t,” answered the doorkeeper. “This is your door, and I am here to serve you.” “Then why did you stand in my way?” “I didn’t,” replied the doorkeeper. “I would have been more than glad to open the door for you, but you never asked to come in!”

In these stories we can find out what the Christian message is and what Christian life of faith is all about. This is a metaphor for a salvation. Christian life is not walking around the pool wearing nice swimming suite, or laying on the beach for sun tanning, but jumping into the water.

Washing in water is a metaphor for cleansing sin. In verse 14 of John Chapter 5, the scripture reads, “Later Jesus found him (the man who had been healed) at the temple and said to him privately, ‘See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.’” To be a Christian is to be cleansed of sin first. Sin is a cause of misfortune in life. The cure of life, cure of sin, is the first thing to do in water of grace. But, also swimming to cross over, reaching out one’s life to the other side is the goal of the salvation in Christ. A swimmer is an adventurer, crossing over other side ignoring how deep the water is below.

Rick Warren, a well known pastor of the Saddleback Church in California, asks us this question, “Will you be a world class Christian or a worldly Christian?” in his book. Worldly Christians look to God primarily for personal fulfillment. They are saved, but self-centered. Their prayers focus on their own needs, blessings, and happiness. It’s a “me-first” faith: How can God make my life more comfortable? They want to use God for their purposes instead of being used for his purpose. In contrast, world-class Christians know they were saved to serve and made for mission. They are eager to receive a personal assignment and excited about the privilege of being used by God. World class Christians are the only fully alive people on the planet. Their joy, confidence, and enthusiasm are contagious because they know they’re making a difference. They wake up each morning expecting God to work through them in fresh ways.

World class Christians think in an other-centered rather than a self-centered way. They engage in global thinking rather than local thinking. They think in creative ways, rather than making excuses.

One of the best swimmers in the Bible is Joseph in Old Testament. Consider Joseph. He was nearly killed, was sold into slavery, was accused of rape, and then was put into prison. His life was moving steadily downhill. But then, God took these tragedies, turned them around, and out of them brought much good. While Joseph was in prison, he made friends with the right-hand man of Pharaoh. When this man was restored to power, he learned of Pharaoh's dreams and remembered that Joseph could interpret dreams. Finally, Joseph was introduced to Pharaoh by one who was a room mate of Joseph in prison. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream. Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he made him second in command over all of Egypt. Joseph was a great swimmer because he trusted God who made good for him from bad situation.

Swimming is trusting while you're in the water. The best swimmer of faith is who trust in God. Jump into the water of grace of God! Christians are not only being washed their sins by water, but they are also the swimmers, adventurers, who swim cross over to the other side with strengthen from our empowering God.

Here is the Good News. God told us this Good News trough the written word of God. Romans 5; 20 reads, "But where sin increased, grace increased all more," The grace of God is overflow to us. In God's river of grace, we can swim freely and joyfully, to reach out the other side, to the world eternal. Amen.