

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Alternate Gospel)

IT'S NOT FAIR! OH, GOODY! GOODY!

John 5:1-9

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Alternate Gospel)

Analysis by Timothy J. Hoyer

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. 3In these lay many invalids-blind, lame, and paralyzed. 5One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" 7The 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 making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." 8Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." 9At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

Author's note: This story's purpose is given by John in the rest of the chapter and the rest of his Gospel.

DIAGNOSIS: The Rule of Death Is Just There

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *The First Shall Be First*

"First come, first served" is what we say is fair. To be fair is very important. Fairness is how we organize our lives. "First

come, first served” seems to be a reasonable way to deal with people, but it does favor those who are more able, quicker, stronger. If one has been ill for thirty-eight years (v. 5), then “First come, first served” condemns. Fairness seems right and we uphold it as a way to live, but we don’t like it if we were last hired and the person who was first hired is the first to keep their job. Why do we have rules at all? They seem to be a part of nature, a needed part of nature like air and water. By our insistence on fairness we testify that fairness is the way to live. But for the man who was ill, he was healed by a frivolous messenger of God who did not know any better about following the rules or what was fair. Yes, more than one rule was broken. The first rule broken was “First come, first served.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *We Trust Rules. Rules Rule!*

Arguments could have erupted among the many disappoint, and yet unhealed invalids-blind, lame, and paralyzed. Why weren’t they picked first? They would have gotten to the water before the healed man would have, if he were still ill. Others may have said that the healed man had been there the longest, and that’s why he had gotten to the pool first. So he deserved the healing from the rule-breaking messenger. No matter, they all were trying to be first in the argument-proof that the only way people can think is according to some set of rules, and that we all desperately desire to come in first. Rules are trusted. Rules are all we have to live by (Moses is the one “on whom you have set your hope” [5:45]). If we just do it right, if we just do what we should, then everything will be okay. We would have life. A religion is whatever we say gives us life. We never protest the religion that says rules give us life; no one ever speaks out against this organized religion. It’s never questioned, like breathing air is not questioned. Fairness is

regarded as a god, for it is trusted as the way to live.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Everyone Comes in Last*

But when we live by rules, the very rules we trust become the rules that accuse us, judge us, and sentence us to death (5:45). We try to live by rules but included among those rules is the rule about death; so rules also guarantee that we perish-come to an end. Death may be called natural, a part of life, but to come to an end, to perish, to be nothing, well, it's like being last-unnoticed and unwanted. Then our worth, our meaning, our simply being loved, are lost. If rules are all we have then there is no life after death. But that rule is too hard to accept, so people weaken it in many ways-we put our trust in reincarnation, we convince ourselves that you only have to good enough-you just have to try, or we do something for those who die so their death has meaning.

PROGNOSIS: The Gift of Life Is Promised by Jesus

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus is Last and First*

This rule-breaking messenger, Jesus, broke a second rule. He broke the rule about the Sabbath. The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath (5:16). Jesus' defense for breaking the rules was that he was working with his Father (5:17). And with that statement, Jesus had now broken a third rule-the rule about not making oneself equal to God (5:18). Then people not only persecuted Jesus, they sought all the more to kill him (5:18). By plot and lies and riot, with soldiers and a cross, they accomplished what they sought. But it is his Father who raises the dead and gives them life (5:21)! The rule of death is broken! The Father gave Jesus life, life with the marks of the cross (20:20). By his death, Jesus' promise of life is given to all people (6:51; 12:32). It is not

fair that the one who broke the rules is given life, but fairness is not the rule anymore.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution) : *Believe Jesus*

When Jesus later found the man he had healed, he told him, “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you” (5:14). Since sin is to not believe in Jesus (16:9), Jesus was telling the man to trust him, not rules, for life. The very works Jesus did, such as healing the man, were done in order that they may testify on Jesus’ behalf that the Father sent him (5:36). The Father sent Jesus to break the rules, especially the rule of death (5:21). Fifty-two times the word “believe” is used by John in the New Revised Standard Version. It is by believing in Jesus that we have life (20:31). Trusting Jesus is the new way of life. Call it the rule of faith-faith in Jesus. Christ-trusting rule breakers, those who have failed, those who can’t be first, are given life. The Father who raised Jesus is given to us as our God. It’s not fair, but you won’t hear them arguing about it.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Last Shall Be First*

That man went off carrying his mat by the authority of Jesus (v. 8), even though it was the Sabbath. Right away that man believed Jesus was the one to follow, not rules. Now he got to honor the Father by honoring Jesus (5:23). Trusting Jesus is the first way to honor Jesus. To forgive others, that is, to give them Jesus’ death and rising as the way to relate to God instead of with rules, is the second way to honor Jesus. The third way to honor Jesus is to love one another with the love Jesus gives us (13:34). Thus, we would work together to put others into the pool of water when the angel stirred it. No need to be first. We have life in Jesus. We are first by being last. We are honored when persecuted. We live when we die. We reject the need to be first by saying to one another, wherever we meet, “The peace of

the Lord be with you.” We get rid of rules as the way to relate to each other by sharing Christ’s peace. We now get to serve others (13:3-16), and by our works of love and forgiveness, we testify to Jesus as the one whom the Father has sent.