

Last Tuesday, right after this terrible thing happened in and to our community, I got a call from George Hugueley's defense attorney asking if I might visit George in jail. We had gotten a call the day before from the jail; I was away and didn't get the call, so I got my contact info to George in case it was he who called. I didn't know George or Yeardeley personally, but thought they might have come to our 5pm service. And I knew for sure that many of our college students knew and loved both George and Yeardeley.

That Tuesday afternoon, Christie and I were scheduled to meet with 15 or so girls from Yeardeley's sorority and others who come to Christ Church. We were there to listen and cry and pray with them. When I told the defense attorney this, she rightly asked, "Are you really able to minister to George and to all of Yeardeley's friends?" She was right in asking this – just doing her job.

The answer to this question is what I want to talk about today. The answer is Yes. And the answer is yes because Christianity is the only narrative that has something true, something healing to say to both sides of this tragedy. If you're like me, you are weary of hearing about it. But, there is something still to say this Sunday morning, because Christianity has a word of healing for both the victim and the victimizer. The gospel has help for George and help for Yeardeley. And the gospel has help for you – for at some time in your life you have been both the victim and the victimizer.

First, we find help for George and for all who have done any kind of wrong in the reading from John. We see an invalid – probably lame, paralyzed, or too sick or addicted to move. He'd been that way for 38 years. He goes to the pool of Bethesda – a place that purportedly has healing properties. When the water is stirred the first one in the water is healed. So it stands to reason that, as the Bible says, *"here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed."*

So people gathered at this pool seeking healing and help. When you picture the scene, don't imagine a well-ordered UVA hospital with clean halls and white gowns. Think instead of a makeshift medical outpost in Haiti for the crippled, deformed and hopeless – a place where you find the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed.

I want to stop and make a connection here. Some of us have physical disorders and illnesses that put us in this man's camp, waiting by the pool. Or you have a child or a spouse or a parent who does. But all of us have suffered and are struggling with some form of blindness, lameness, or paralysis. Maybe not for 38 years - but maybe so. And often it feels like forever, if you're suffering from depression, anxiety or addiction. Or you just feel a deep sense of unworthiness that turns your world gray. Or you feel paralyzed with fear, or anger, or lust. And in some ways, because of this thing, you feel like your life is on hold, or out of control as you lie on a mat, waiting for help that has not come.

Obviously George is in this camp. You know the details of his life now, just like all of America. But don't think for a second that George is alone or George is somehow different. We are all in the same camp. For the gospel truth is that every single one of us is capable of doing what George did. Or at least something like it. Every single one of us, if the right buttons were pushed, could find ourselves in handcuffs on a Monday morning.

After the Virginia Tech massacre I preached this same message about Cho – the gunman. Nobody really believed me, because Cho was different. He was not like us. He had mental problems. He looked different. He was a monster. It was easy to demonize Cho because he was a so-called outsider.

When Christie and I were with the sorority girls on Tuesday, I asked them just to talk about their feelings and emotions. There was anger at what happened to their friend. And anger and outrage are right emotions, of course. But the girls' emotions were complicated, because they know and love both Yeardley and George. George is not the outsider. He is, as Leonard Sandridge, said, "one of our own." So, George is not different and he is not alone. As Jesus says out of every human heart comes all kinds of iniquity.

I say this not to be morbid but to remind us that we are bound together in our weakness. I love the story that my 100 year old friend tells about her husband when he was a boy. One day he was walking down the street and he bumped into a woman who was cross-eyed. The woman said to him, "Young man, why don't you look where you're going!" To which the boy replied, "Ma'am, why don't you go where you are looking!" As Paul says, the thing I don't want to do is what I do, and the thing I want to do, I don't do. In one way or another, none of us really goes where he is looking. We constantly veer off the straight and narrow.

But off the straight and narrow, by the pool for invalids and cripples, is where Jesus comes into our lives. This is where you'll find Him in your life. You won't turn to Him otherwise. We don't get ourselves together and come to Him. He comes to us as we're lying on our mats, paralyzed. Jesus comes to George in jail, because George can't get out of jail to come to Him. But in your own jail, Jesus comes to you. And He comes with forgiveness and healing.

When, in the gospel reading, Jesus goes into this scene of despair and disease and spots the man lying on his mat, he asks him an important and not at all obvious question. "*Do you want to get well?*" This is where many sermons on this passage go wrong. They pin the man's healing on his own willingness to be healed. Show yourself worthy and willing and God will heal you. But, when Jesus asks, "*do you want to get well?*" the man does NOT say yes. His response is ugly or at least flippant. Something like: "you idiot – can't you see what's happening and has been happening for 38 years. Anyway, no one helps me."

But despite his ugliness, Jesus comes to him on his mat and heals him. Not because of his merit or his willingness or desire. Jesus heals him not because the man is good, but because God is good, because God is a God of grace and a God of healing. The man – having waited for 38 years – finally encounters grace. His healing begins with the grace of God.

On Tuesday, one girl asked, “what on earth could you say to George right now? What hope does he have for his life?” Because Jesus comes straight into our own messy lives with his grace and forgiveness and love, we do have something to say to George and to say to all of us: Jesus comes to you, loves you, forgives you. And in Him is your only hope for healing. He is a God of grace. When He comes to you on your mat and you feel and know His total love and acceptance of you in your illness, then your healing begins with the grace of God.

Of course George will face and should face the consequence of his actions. That is the law rightly at work. I pray it will be part of his healing. But healing usually involves some kind of pain and death. As an example I want to use just one more illustration from the *Chronicles of Narnia*. It’s the story of Eustace, a selfish boy who becomes so selfish that he turns into a dragon. In greed, he’d shoved a gold bracelet on his arm when he was still a boy; after he’d become a dragon the bracelet bit into his forearm causing great pain. He was miserable and was granted a change of heart – unlike the man in our gospel, we see that Eustace did have a desire to be healed.

Aslan the Lion comes into his scene of misery and leads him to a pool of water and tells him to undress. Eustace scratches off layers of dragon skin with his claws, but finds each layer knobbly and hard and tough. Finally he gives up. Eustace says,

“Then the Lion said, ‘You will have to let me undress you. I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back and let him do it. The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peeled off.

Then he caught hold of me and threw me into the water. It smarted like anything but only for a moment. After that it became perfectly delicious...all the pain had gone from my arm...I’d turned into a boy again.”

The healing begun by the grace of God always involves pain because it always leads to death, the death of self– but it is the death of the very thing that is killing you. The thing you’ve tried to scratch away by yourself without success. The thing that Jesus must take away for you.

George and his family are experiencing a kind of death that I pray will lead to healing through this word of grace. Yeardeley and her family of course have experienced a literal death, which I trust will lead to a deeper and permanent

healing through another word from the gospel. Here we have help not just for Yeardeley, but for everyone. For as Dave said in his sermon last week, we do not know when our own appointment with death will be. I've done 4 funerals in the last 4 weeks; mine could be the 5th.

The help for Yeardeley and all who have died in Christ is Yeardeley has gone to a place where, as we read in Revelation, there is no night. The night with all its darkness and all its terror, the one particular night of a week ago, does not exist there. There is no night there.

But there is a river of the water of life, water that will wash away all scent of hurt and trauma, all memory of pain and loss. And there is a tree of life, whose leaves are given for healing, for the healing of the nations. Leaves given for the healing of a city. Leaves given for the healing of a community. Leaves given for the healing of a family – 2 families. Leaves given for the healing of a young woman who is now made perfect. Leaves given for a young man, whose healing, like everyone's healing, must begin with the grace of God.

Amen.