

The Reverend Matthew Hanisian
St. Martin's-in-the-Field
Easter 6C/Rite 13 Celebration
John 5:1-9

"Stand up, take your mat and walk."

We all have our mats—those things that either seem like they are what defines us, or what holds us, confining us to a specific boundary, or our mats could be those things that we need to give up in order to be free and to walk.

We all, at moments, need someone to come and either stir up the waters for us—a temporary fix—or to literally come and help us walk. (note: Jesus doesn't just "help" Jesus heals completely.)

Rite 13-ers: we are about to celebrate you taking your first steps down the path that will lead you to adulthood...and if you think that adults don't need help with picking up their mats and walking, boy have I got news for you...ALL of us need help, none of us are immune from needing that help. And none of us are immune from needing God to intervene and do what we think might be impossible.

I mean, Look at the gospel passage for this morning. A man who has been unable to walk for 38 years is healed and no longer needs his mat—that thing that defined him as a beggar...sure, his mat provided him some comfort so he wasn't sitting on the ground...but his mat also conscribed him into that one small area. Like I said, we all have our mats...and when we let Him, what does Jesus do? Jesus comes to heal and relieve us of our mats, to give us our freedom.

And if you look closely, John puts in a little detail at the end that shouldn't be lost. Notice WHEN this all happened. John writes, "Now that day was a Sabbath;" a day when, by LAW, no work of ANY kind was supposed to happen. Jesus doesn't care—EVEN the Sabbath can't stop the love and healing that are hallmarks of Jesus's ministry... the law or "doing what's right for the sake of appearances" doesn't stop Jesus from entering into our lives and healing us, from making us whole.

I am a proud graduate of Kilgour Elementary School in Cincinnati, Ohio—Go Mustangs! And, in the library at Kilgour we had—when we were in Kindergarten or First Grade—we had weekly story time. We would march into the library and each of us would get to choose a carpet square (a rectangular piece of carpet about this big) to sit on while we heard the story of the week. You had to stay on YOUR mat, within the area of your mat's space. This was difficult for some members of our class. Every week minor scuffles broke out, emotions ran hot, and the patience of the librarian ran short...all over who got which mat. Because of COURSE, SOME mats were BETTER than others. In particular there was one coveted orange shag carpet mat that was THE cool mat. So intense was this rivalry for the orange shag mat that by mid-November the mat had mysteriously vanished.

Rite 13-ers—you are at a wonderful crossroads in your lives. For you 12, today YOUR mat is a pretty obvious one, and we are celebrating you giving up that mat of childhood—whether you have the orange shag mat or not...now is the time to give up that mat as we celebrate you standing up and taking your first steps as you walk down the path that will lead you to adulthood.

You are at a point in your lives where you are leaving behind the mat of childhood—AND you are doing so with the support of your peers/the older youth/your parents/this congregation. EACH of those groups will play an important role in your development as you start this journey to becoming adults.

LOOK AT ALL THESE PEOPLE WHO, IN A COUPLE OF MOMENTS GOING TO PROMISE TO BE YOUR HELPERS, ROLE MODELS, COMPANIONS, FRIENDS AND GUIDES.

Today we are also marking, that as a congregation, we are taking our first new steps together. Like our Rite 13 Celebrities, we do not know exactly what the road ahead looks like. But Jesus commands us as the body of Christ, alive and active here at St. Martin's-in-the-Field, that we need to take up our mats and walk.

To be sure there will be moments of leisurely walking, moments of excited sprinting, heck, we might even dance. But one thing I know...NONE of us, will walk on water. And, we might have moments of tripping over our own shoelaces. And, even worse, heaven forbid it, we might even stumble and fall, skinning our knees. All of these are OK...

BUT, I pray that our journey together...is an epic one—a journey that we will all look back on years from now and marvel at what the Holy Spirit inspired and helped us to accomplish--which if we let it will be even more than we could ask or imagine. The beggar in the story just wanted Jesus to help him get down into the waters and Jesus gave him so much more than that. In the coming weeks, months, and years we will discover together where we have both opportunities and where we are challenged to give up our mat and stretch our freshly strengthened legs.

I would like to point out that those challenges and opportunities may not always come from the people wearing collars. In fact, as I've listened to and read about the history of this parish...and have met the vestry and other ministry leaders here: it seems that you all are QUITE good at finding and presenting where we, as the body of Christ, can use our vast resources and gifts to raise up not only ourselves...but more importantly, those who need to hear those words, "take up your mat and walk."

Now, as is pretty typical, Jesus is the perfect pattern for us to follow: take a look at the sequence of what Jesus does. John writes that Jesus SAW the man... Crucial to this is to first SEE the person, SEE the issue at hand, SEE the injustice—not walk by and think, "well, someone else will take care of that," but to SEE those in need. Second, Jesus listens to his situation. He

hears directly from the person in need, and finally he is moved to action. We all have the ability to be the person who says to another, “Take up your mat and walk.”

This congregation is full of the love and compassion of Jesus—We are known as ones who SEE those among our community, among our city, among our world and we RESPOND...providing our own “take up your mat and walk.”

There are dozens of wonderful ministries here at St. Martin’s like: the homeless shelter, the work done at Paul’s Place, the day school here, the work done by Tatuia in Kenya that we’ll hear more about at the Adult Forum next Sunday...the list goes on and on...ALL of them have come from this congregation seeing a need, discerning what help is needed, and being moved to action.

Now, despite what some of us might think from time to time....none of us is Jesus...so unlike the man who is healed instantly by Jesus simply telling him to “take up his mat and walk,” the tangible or visible effect of what WE provide might not be seen immediately—in fact MOST of the time we WON’T see immediate results. We might have to work for months, maybe even years before any result can be detected...and that is OK. But when we employ the skills, talents, and God-given gifts that we bring to the situation at hand WE can BE the catalyst that helps turn the situation around, WE can BE the ray of light in the darkness of someone’s life...we can be even the glimmer of hope that the person or the situation so desperately needs.

Want proof of how easy that is to do, and how that all works? I bet if you take a good look at your lives you might have had this scenario happen to you at some point: You’re in a horrible mood—or are having just one of those days that makes you want to tear your hair out...and from out of nowhere someone you love, or someone you know who cares about you, or even someone you haven’t seen or spoken to in next to forever, randomly calls, or emails, or texts...or simply reaches out to you just to say hello and reconnect? Don’t you almost always feel better, happier, or just plain back to level after that? I love it when that happens. That person in that moment is Jesus taking your mat from you so you can walk.

Now, next Sunday is Youth Sunday and we’ll have three members of the YAC Group preach to us. Rite 13-ers, pay attention to the sermons next week—listen to how the people of this place...and their peers, have made such a HUGE impact in the lives of these three seniors. Now, I haven’t even read their sermons—which I’m sure will be awesome...but I’ll bet that if you listen closely you’ll hear about the people and moments where this church has helped them to pick up their mats and walk.

And the reality is that we ALL have the power to make a lasting and powerful change in someone’s life. When we do that we are living into the promises we will make to you Rite 13-ers here in a few moments. When we help someone to, “Take up their mat and walk,” we are living more fully into our baptismal covenant which asks us: “Will you respect the dignity of every human being?...Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself?” The answer is: We will with God’s help.

My brothers and sisters, together, with God's help, we will do wonderful and powerful things...not simply because we have the strong legs to do so. We will identify where we can change lives, and change the world...not simply because we have the people power, not simply because of the special gifts that we possess, not simply because it makes us feel good when we help others....but we will do so because Jesus tells us we NEED TO make a difference in our world in His name. When we do those things in the name of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ we help the kingdom of God happen right here and right now.

Today we celebrate Grant, Ty, Parker, Veronica, Amelia, Eleanor, Daniel, Madison, Caity, Chris, Jacob and Zach who are leaving behind the mats of their childhood and are taking those first new steps towards adulthood. THEIR mats are easy to identify. For the rest of us: what mats are WE clinging to? What mats do WE need to let go of, or ask Jesus to take from us so that we might walk? And where, with our OWN fresh legs, will we go, proclaiming the joy and love of God with each new step we take?

AMEN.