

- Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, amen. When it comes to dealing with change, most of us have some very mixed feelings. Just take a moment as you leave the chapel this morning and really look at all those students milling around on campus. You could bet your bottom dollar that quite a few of them, maybe even the majority, are more than ready to pack up their bags and head for the next destination. They're relieved to finish up all that work. They're looking forward to a change of scenery, but still can be a little nervous about leaving the old friends and familiar places behind. Maybe they're feeling a little unsettled about exactly what comes next. And what about all those parents? Why, they're pleased as punch to see their offspring all decked out in those mortarboards and gowns, proud to see them grow up for real this time, not to mention wrapping up those tuition payments. But still, they too can be nostalgic for the days when they could rock little Johnny or little Sally in their arms to sleep at night, keeping them safe from the world. As for the faculty and staff, well, they've gone through this before. They are often sad to see favorite students moving on or even sadder still to see a well-liked colleague retiring or relocating. But they also know that they have a new year to look forward to in the fall, new faces, new talents, new possibilities in the classroom. Change happens. It's everywhere and it's a mixed bag. Some people run with it for all they're worth, almost to the point that they can spend their lives chasing it. Others dig their heels in and do everything they can to try and stop it. It's a topic that's often on our minds because it's so inescapable. Some of you may remember a bestseller from a few years back written by Judith Viorst called "Necessary Losses." In that book, she talked about the inevitable changes in our lives and the growth that can come from those changes. It was a book that touched a deep chord within many people. Of course, a group of sophisticated worshipers like ourselves believe we know what change is about. We're ready for it and in many cases, we wrote the book about it. On the whole, we believe it can be a good thing, especially when we're the ones choosing the kind of change we want to make. As Deborah Smith Douglas has suggested, we live in the midst of a self-improvement industry which tells us that with enough time, money, and motivation, we can make lots of changes for the better. Why not be smarter, stronger, sexier, more popular, more successful, or more attractive with just a little effort? Indeed, there are opportunities galore luring us to make those kinds of personal changes, even if we don't stick with them for very long. But there's another kind of change which challenges us on a whole different level, the kind that we don't necessarily initiate ourselves, but rather comes in response to a call. It's the kind of change that produces long-lasting effects and causes us to reexamine some basic questions, like who am I, what the most important things in life and beyond life, what are the places where God is asking me to grow and change lest I wither and die? This is the kind of change we encounter in today's gospel. Here, in the Pool of Bethzatha, by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, surrounded by five porticos, lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed. They came to this particular pool because it was known to be a place of miraculous healings. You see, occasionally, the still surface of the pool was disturbed and whoever first stepped into the water after it had moved would be cured of whatever afflictions he or she had. One of those who came to the pool every day was a man who had been ill for 38 years. Jesus noticed him lying there and somehow knew he had been there for a long time. And so Jesus asked him a question. "Do you want to be healed?" The sick man answered, "Sir, I have

no one "to put me into the pool when the water is troubled "and while I am going, another steps down before me." Just try and imagine this man's hopelessness. With no one to help him, he had no chance of getting to the healing water before someone lucky enough to be just a little more mobile than he got there first. For 38 years, a lifetime, and for a century Palestine, he had been lying by that pool, watching others step into those waters and emerging whole, while he remained immobilized and isolated year after year after year. What would it do to someone to be so close to those life-changing waters and still be unable to reach them in time? Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be healed?" But it was almost as if it didn't matter what Jesus had asked. Perhaps Jesus was the first person who had spoken to this man in years. Perhaps the poor man wasn't as interested in Jesus' question as the fact that Jesus spoke to him, the fact that this was someone who might carry him down to the water just like he had envisioned all those years someone might do for him. As Jesus speaks to this man, can't you imagine him estimating his chances of actually being first, cursing his predicament, glancing restlessly at the pool, looking for somebody, anybody, to help him? Jesus does not do what the man expects him to do. Bypassing altogether what custom and tradition dictated, he did not carry him down to the water. He simply says to the man, "Rise up, take your pallet, and walk." And the man does. What a teachable moment this could have been if Jesus had talked straight to the man, "Look at me, trust in me, forget about being first, "I can make you well." But Jesus doesn't do it that way. He is full of surprises. Instead, he heals an afflicted person, on the Sabbath, no less, so quietly and unobtrusively that if anyone watching had blinked, they would have missed it. This time, there was no laying on of hands, no prayers, no discourse on the importance of faith. In an act so compassionate and so full of grace that the poor man wouldn't have been able to imagine it if he had tried, Jesus had no need to instruct the man. He simply calls him to walk away from his old life, to leave behind the place that had disappointed him so many times and prolonged his suffering so many years and become a new man. "You are well, you are whole, you have received "your miracle from a source you never would have expected." The gospel does not indicate that the man ever paused to thank Jesus or to praise God in any way for his healing, nor that Jesus tried to explain anything that had happened. He simply slipped unnoticed into the crowd and only later sought him out, telling him, "See, you are well. "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." In other words, Jesus tried to say to the man, "There are worse things than illness. "Now do you want to be truly healed in body and in spirit? "Are you ready to enter into relationship with me "so that you may live eternally?" Simone Weil has written about the attachments that we sometimes form to our own troubles which can stand as serious obstacles in our effort to change. "Another effect of affliction," she writes, "is little by little to make the soul its accomplice "by injecting a poison of inertia into it, "and anyone who has suffered affliction "for a long enough time, there is a complicity "with regard to his own affliction. "This complicity impedes all the efforts "he might make to improve his lot. "It goes so far as to prevent him from seeking "a way of deliverance. "It may even induce him to shun the means of deliverance. "In such cases, it often veils itself with excuses "which are often ridiculous. "Even a person who has come through his affliction "will still have something left in him "which impels him to plunge into it again. "If the affliction has been ended as a result "of some kindness, it may even take the form "of hatred for the benefactor. "It is sometimes easy to deliver an unhappy man "from his present distress, but it is truly difficult "to set him free from his past affliction. "Only God can do it." In the case of this crippled man by the Pool at Bethzatha, perhaps this is exactly what happened. Were 38 years of suffering simply too much to leave behind on a moment's notice? Until he could accept the full import of the gifts Jesus came to bring, the new identity he had to give him, perhaps that was the case. His affliction was all he believed he had. Therapists see this kind

of resistance again and again in their work with patients. Just when patients begin to zero in on the difficulties that they're seeking help for, they often begin to back away from it, maybe even to leave therapy altogether. Resistance is a sign that real growth may be just around the corner, if the patient can recognize it for what it is and move beyond it. Spiritual directors and pastors also sometimes confront this type of resistance in Christians who come forward asking for help in their relationships with God. In a study published about a series of relationships between seminarians and their spiritual director, it was determined that resistance was almost always a stage through which they had to pass. "I feel afraid to get intimate with God, "lest God put a demand on me to sacrifice too much, "even to become a martyr, and lose my personal identity," one student wrote. Or according to another, "I realize that I've been "intentionally choosing anxiety, death, "intellect, rather than trust, life, heart "in my relationship with God. "I see, too, what advantages there supposedly were "in holding onto my anxiety along with trying, "working, proving, controlling." Of course, resistance to God's call has been around since the beginning of time. Remember Adam's response when he heard God calling in the garden? "I heard the sound of you in the garden "and I was afraid, because I was naked. "I hid myself." The children of Israel stood trembling at the base of Mount Sinai and said to Moses, "You speak to us and we will hear, "but let not God speak to us, lest we die." Or to recall a famous example, when the Lord directed Jonah to undertake a mission to the people of Ninevah, Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. Even Simon Peter, when he saw the net-breaking catch of fish hauled in at Jesus' direction, he fell down at Jesus' knees saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, oh Lord." We all know that no relationship, even those which are most precious to us, ever develops without some difficulties. On the one hand, we want our spouses and our friends and our companions to be the same tomorrow as they are today. On the other hand, we get pretty bored with sameness and we like to discover new and interesting things about the other. These two desires can clash in us and produce conflict and resistance in all our interpersonal relationships and even our relationship with God. As Fraulein Josephine Von Beek as described it, rather than accepting the strangeness of the other, whether God, person, or thing, as a gracious invitation, we tend to be threatened by it, to keep it at arm's length, to protect ourselves against it, to sit in judgment on it, to drag it before the tribunal of our ego, to measure it by the standard of our discernments, and to overpower it. In the light of this defensive attitude, the direct, active encounter starts to look like an undesirable thing to do. Yet we know that to maintain any relationship as a living, breathing entity, we can only resist change so long. Either we grow in our relationships, including our relationship with God, or we die. For whatever reasons, it seems the crippled man whom Jesus healed in this story never really did get it, at least in the part of the story that is recorded for us in Scripture. By the time Jesus had later identified himself to the man, the religious authorities had spotted the man walking around with his mat under his arm, which was considered to be an illegal act on the Sabbath. "Who is the man who said to you take up your mat and walk?" they demanded to know, and as soon as the man figured it out, he told them, "It was Jesus." That was all they needed to begin to persecute Jesus for doing such things on the Sabbath, and when he responded to them by saying, "My Father is still working, and I also am working," it only added fuel to the fire, because Jesus not only healed on the Sabbath, he considered himself equal to God. And so, they sought all the more to kill him for it. Indeed, there are as many ways to resist the changes God calls us to make as there are people on the face of the earth. The crippled man was too focused on his own affliction to fully acknowledge who Jesus was, and the Pharisees were too bound up by religious legalism and too full of their own righteousness. But thank goodness, attachments to our grievances and expectations alone don't have to destroy our relationship

with God, even as the crippled man by the Pool at Bethzatha seemed more attached to his grievance than he was open to who Jesus was, Jesus nevertheless healed him, still leaving the door open for a deeper relationship to develop by reaching out to him with compassion and tenderness. It's just when we become so attached to our need to be right, indeed, when we become so confident that we are always right, like the Pharisees, that we distance ourselves further and further away from Jesus and place ourselves outside the longing for change that might open us to a real relationship with God. As Simone Weil once said, "Sometimes we are in danger of starving to death, "not because there is no bread, "but because we think we are not hungry." Is this a special risk for those of us who are so used to being in charge that we chose the kinds of changes we want to make rather than responding to those God calls us to make? Is this a particular vulnerability for those of us in an environment such as this where we seek everyday to master the truth without leaving much room for the truth to master us, where we pride ourselves on all that we have accomplished without always acknowledging what God has accomplished through us, where our lives are so full and our knowledge so vast that we don't even realize we are hungry? How open are we to the changes God would have us to make? The whole Church faces this issue in an especially challenging way at the present time as the culture around us changes at a mind-boggling rate? How prepared are we to keep up? How resourceful can we be in communicating the lasting values of the Gospel to a changing, hungry world? Even in the face of our many ways of resisting God, we can be reassured to know that by grace God's longing for our wholeness is more powerful than our own expectations or our needs for control. By grace, God does not wait until we know the depth of our need or awaken to the depth of our need to be right. By grace, God comes to us at the high tide of our grievances and in the full flowering of our dead wrong certainties, asking us with a voice full of compassion, "Do you want to be healed?"

- Brothers in other spaces on this campus, who have been blessed by Your spirit to achieve great things during their sojourn here, we gather with you mindful of our sisters and brothers on this campus and beyond its bounds, whose day is marked by suffering, on behalf of ourselves and of all your children, we have come to sing Your praises, to hear Your word, and to lay before You our prayers for all of Your people. Lord, in Your mercy.

- Hear our prayer.

- We pray for all who are beginning a new phase of their lives this day, for those who have achieved great goals, for those being honored by family, and friends, and faculty at this university, we give You thanks for this institution and others like it, where learning is prized and truth esteemed. We confess that we have often settled for our own definitions of truth and for human ways to learn. Forgive us for putting ourselves at the center of knowledge, and for neglecting the truth that all things begin, and move, and end in You. Lord, in Your mercy.

- Hear our prayer.

- We pray for Your people on this campus and elsewhere for whom this is not a day of rejoicing, for those whose goals have not been achieved, for those whose dreams have become disappointments, and for those who live amid such suffering that they do not know the pleasures of peace. We pray for the nations

struggling to find a way to security, grant that they will not take refuge in false hopes like weapons of destruction or oppression of their adversaries. We pray for the people of India and Pakistan that they will find honor among the nations of the earth for contributing to peace and not to fear. We pray for the people of Indonesia that they will find serenity among the nations of the earth for establishing justice and not repression. We pray for the people of Northern Ireland as they prepare to vote upon their future. Grant that they will cast their lot with the Prince of Peace in whose name they have separately endured so many troubles. Lord, in Your Mercy.

- Hear our prayer.

- And care for all who are suffering this day, for those who confront diseases that we can name and not cure, for those who are tormented by demons that we fear but do not understand, for those in the grip of poverty and hunger that we understand and can help, but have thus far chosen not to do so. Hear us as we name them now in the silence of our hearts. Lord, in Your mercy.

- Hear our prayer.

- Forgive our indifference, comfort the ailing, grant the light of the love to the dying, and draw us all together before your throne of grace. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. To God who created us and who saves us, we offer our praise in thanksgiving, and now offer a portion of the ways that we have been blessed as signs of our devotion. Let us offer our gifts to God's work through this church.  
(placid organ music)