

This photo is available in the print version
of Sabbath.

**When challenged by the religious authorities for healing
this lame man on the sabbath, Jesus announces, “My
Father is still working, and I also am working.”**

*Bartolomé Estaban Murillo (1617-1682), CHRIST AT THE POOL OF BETHESDA, 1667-70, Oil on canvas,
237 x 261 cm. National Gallery, London. Photo: The Bridgeman Art Gallery.*

Sir, I Have No One

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The Gospel of John's story of Jesus healing the lame man on the sabbath (5:1-9) offered a dramatic narrative for Bartolomé Estaban Murillo to paint for the hospital church of the Confraternity de la Caridad (Brotherhood of Charity) in Seville.

The Spanish Baroque master captures the exact moment that the man explains his story to Jesus. The man, who has been ill for thirty-eight years, lies on his mat by the pool of Bethesda, for he believes that when its water moves, the first people to enter will be miraculously healed. (Tradition holds that an angel of the LORD descends to stir the water, as recorded in John 5:4 in some manuscripts.) But the man has no one to put him in the water when it is stirred up, and while he is making his way down, someone else steps ahead of him. He tells a story of helplessness that many, not only invalids, can understand. People continue to step metaphorically in front of, over, and on the needy and weak in our society, in opposition to God's merciful kindness shown by Jesus.

"Now that day was a sabbath," the gospel says, and steers the story toward controversy (5:9). The religious authorities offer only criticism: to the man for carrying his mat, and to Jesus for the healing act on the sabbath. But to those who would see and understand, Jesus explains, "My Father is still working, and I am also working" (5:17).

The artist, in typical baroque style, exaggerates the gestures of the main characters as if they are actors on stage conveying their emotion to even those in the back rows of the theater. The healing occurs in the foreground of the "staged" scene. Other physically disabled people are in the middleground on the right, and the pool is shown in the background. The angel of the Lord, also representing the Holy Spirit, may be found in the burst of sunlight just above the balcony of the "backdrop" portico.

Jesus offers his hand in healing to the man as he says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (5:8). The mat is prominently placed behind the man's back. Three disciples stand to Jesus' right and witness the healing.

The mission of the Brotherhood of Charity, who commissioned this painting and to whom the artist Murillo belonged, was to help the poor and the ill. They were disciples whose lives had been changed by viewing their Lord not only visit the sick, but heal them on the sabbath.