

Encounters with Jesus: Healing at Bethesda

John 5:1-18

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on February 19, 2017]

I

Have you ever noticed how in the gospels Jesus asks a lot of questions?

We are used to Jesus' teachings and Christians and non-Christians alike will quote his more well-known sayings.

Less attention is paid to the questions Jesus asks.

"But who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15)

"What more do you do than others?" (Matthew 5:47)

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3:33)

"What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51)

Good teachers know that students learn as much by the questions they ask as by the information they impart.

And so today we look at one of the most poignant questions Jesus asked,

"Do you want to be made well?"

Even though Jesus posed this question to a man who was paralyzed from birth,
it speaks to all of us,
because to be made well is to be made whole,
and to be made whole is to experience the gift of life
that Jesus gives in all its abundance.

II

Our story takes place at the Pool of Bethesda.

The Pool of Bethesda was famous in ancient times as a place of healing.

The pool was in Jerusalem, just north of the Temple mount.

If you go to Jerusalem you can see it for yourself;
I saw it in 1993.

For centuries, scholars believed there was no such pool, as there was no sign of it in modern-day Jerusalem.

It was assumed that the description in John was a fabrication,
written by someone unfamiliar with the city.

Then, in the 19th century, German archaeologist Conrad Schick discovered a pool,
which he contended was the Pool of Bethesda of John 5.

Further excavation in 1964 revealed other features that confirmed the accuracy of
John's description in today's lesson.

The pool was fed by an underground spring, and in the time of Jesus it was
surrounded by porticos offering shade and shelter.

Legend had it that on occasion an angel would come down and trouble the waters
of the pool and the first person into the water would be healed.

Did you notice that there is no verse 4 in this passage?

That is because some of the later manuscripts of the Gospel of John have an extra
verse at that point explaining the tradition about the angel.

But the oldest and best manuscripts of John do not have that verse,
so most modern translations, including the RSV, NRSV, and NIV include
verse 4 as a footnote.

Because of this legend the pool had become the gathering place for anyone and everyone with some sort of sickness,
but especially the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed.

But it wasn't just a Jewish healing place.

The evidence suggests that Gentiles also regarded it as a sacred site.

At one point it was dedicated to the ancient Greek god of healing, Asclepius, who was called "savior" by his followers.

It was the hope of being healed that brought the man in our story to the pool.

Every day he came,
starting as a young child—
no doubt brought to the pool by his parents—
and on every day thereafter,
for thirty-eight years,
he took his place among the other ailing, infirm people
who came in search of a miracle.

They all came every day watching intently for the slightest ripple in the water.

A small bubbling from the underground spring...
or a slight breeze...
or even an angel's wings stirring up the water...
and there was a stampede of invalids trying to be the first one into the pool.

III

Then along comes Jesus, who,
as John has been telling us,
is the true Son of the true God,
the Word made flesh to dwell among us.

He sees the lame man and why he singles out this particular man we will never know.

With dozens and dozens of people in need of healing,
why is this man chosen?

I can't answer that question any more than we can answer why one person gets cancer and another doesn't.

Jesus looks at the man,
sees into his soul,
and says to him,
"Do you want to be made well?"

It's not as simple a question as it sounds.

For thirty-eight years this man's whole life has been organized around one thing—
coming to the pool in the hopes of one day being healed.

Notice that he doesn't answer Jesus' question.

Instead he goes into an elaborate explanation as to why he can't get to the water
when the angel stirs it up...

the fact that no one will help him and so he's consigned to sitting there the
rest of his life with no hope of ever being healed.

I can imagine him saying to Jesus:

"No thanks, I think I'll just stay here on my pallet and wait for the waters to ripple.

"I've been here thirty-eight years and I know what to expect and I know all of the other people here.

“True, I’m probably not going to get better, but – you know – I’ve gotten used to being here, so thanks all the same, Jesus, but I’ll just continue to lie here.”

Clearly, the man has made a way of life out of his thirty-eight years of waiting for healing.

IV

But, like so many of the things Jesus says in John,
his question to the man has a deeper meaning:

Do you want to be healed?

*In other words, do you really **want** to get better, or are you now content to spend your days lounging around here with the feeble excuse that someone else always beats you into the water?*

In a flash Jesus does what the pool stood for but wasn’t been doing very well.

A word is all it takes: *“Pick up your mattress and walk.”*

We aren’t told if the man believed,
but clearly he must have, otherwise he would not have obeyed Jesus’
command to pick up his mat and walk.

He now finds himself launched on the much harder,
but much more satisfying,
way of life that goes with no longer being an invalid.

This is the thing that gets Jesus in trouble.

The second half of our lesson tells how the Jewish leaders don’t like the fact that Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath.

Their notion of the Sabbath is one tied up in legalistic assumptions about what God requires.

God rested on the Sabbath, right?

Well, so should we!

Jesus, however, understands the Sabbath differently.

He's living with a different sense of God's time,
and a different sense of how God would have people use the gift of time.

Instead of trying to avoid anything the law identifies as "work" on the Sabbath,
Jesus uses the Sabbath to glorify God by extending mercy to someone in need.

How will we use our Sabbaths?

Hopefully at the end of the time God has given us, it will be appropriate for
someone to look back and say,
"Now *that* was a Sabbath!"

V

So here, my friends, is the question this encounter with Jesus poses to all of us:

Do we fear the cure more than the illness?

William Sloan Coffin said that if it is hell to be guilty, it's certainly scarier to be responsible—

i.e., response-able—

able to respond to God's call,

able to respond to the word and love of Jesus.

When we cease being the victim—

"I can't get to the water Jesus; there's always someone else who gets there first,"—

and we start being responsible,

...suddenly our legs are strong enough for us to walk

alongside others who are in pain and need help.

Our arms are empowered to embrace our enemies and the outcasts.

We no longer make excuses.

Instead we walk forward to new life in Jesus Christ and go to work serving, healing, hoping, and living lives of joy and fullness.

Charles Campbell, in his book, *The Word before the Powers*, wonders if one of the ways the Principalities and Powers, the Systems of Domination, keep us under their thumb is by keeping us busy, tired, and diverted.

We become numbed to the call of Christ to serve the hurting because we don't have time or energy.

We come home after work and collapse in front of the TV until it is time to go to bed and the next day repeat the process all over again.

Weekends are when we want to get out of town or do something else.

So we live life to the minimum.

We say we want change when we actually want to remain the same—
we just want to feel better about it.

We know that to get up and follow Jesus will involve us in people's lives in ways we're not sure we want,
because to be whole means to be re-connected with God and God's people and God's creation.

No more isolation.

No more living my own private life where no one bothers me.

To be whole means to get off the couch and get involved.

It means to work our tails off, doing behind the scenes work that is tedious and overlooked.

We know that to walk out the door and say,
 “Here am I, Jesus! Send me!”
 is an invitation to maybe getting crucified like Jesus.

As Father Daniel Berrigan once observed,

*“If you’re going to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood,
 because that is where you’ll end up.”*

We know all of that, so maybe our couches and our pallets don’t look so bad.

No wonder so many churches are still on the pallet.

No wonder so many of us are reluctant about being made whole.

And no wonder we have neither the courage nor the will nor the energy to say,
 “No!” to the many ways the Principalities and Powers grind us all down.

No wonder we are reluctant to say “Yes!” to Jesus and the abundant Life he offers.

VI

"Do you want to be made well?"

Because if you do, you may need to step out of your comfort zone and take a leap
 of faith and venture out into the unknown.

Like Linus and his security blanket, if you're determined to hold on to your base of
 security, you may well be closing the door to the possibilities God has in store for
 you.

"Do you want to be made well?"

You see, sometimes you and I are the lame man who comes to the pool every
 single day for 38 years waiting for the waters to ripple.

Like him, sometimes, we sit and sit and sit,
 waiting for something magical to happen.

But the angel never appears,

the water never stirs,
 and we are just as broken and just as powerless today
 as we were yesterday.

Asclepius, that false god, has let us down once again.

But then Jesus reaches out to us,
 and our waiting is over,
 and our healing begins.

And THIS is the sign, the point I believe Jesus is making:
 Jesus brings life,
 while everything else just brings waiting.

"Do you want to be made well?"

In the final analysis, it's a question only you can answer.

You can start by asking yourself,
 what do I need to be healed of?

What's my impediment?

What's standing in my way?

What sort of things do I need to change about my life in order to be whole?

Are there things you need to let go of?

For example, are you holding on to anger,
 nursing some injustice or hurt from years back?

Are you holding on to unresolved grief,
 looking back to something or someone you once held dear
 that was taken away from you?

Perhaps you're holding on to a destructive habit,
 wanting to be healthy and whole,
 but not willing to stop smoking

or drinking
 or popping pills
 or eating your troubles away.

Whatever you are holding on to...
 whatever is holding you back...
 isn't it time to let go and let God?

Isn't it time to get up,
 take your mat,
 and start walking?

VII

Well, our story ends on a positive note.

The lame man takes a deep breath and nods to Jesus,

“Yes, I want to be whole, healed and well. I know it will take time, Jesus. I know it will take work and lots of unlearning of old pain-filled habits accumulated over thirty-eight years. And I'll have to learn some new habits.

“I know it is not going to be easy, but yes, Jesus, make me a whole person.”

And Jesus does...
 no questions asked...
 no stipulations...
 no checking to see if he is truly deserving or not.

Jesus just heals him: **grace.**

And the man picks up his mat and walks away from the Pool of Bethesda to new life...to wholeness.

And this is the Good News: Jesus came into the world that we may have life and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

In the words of an old hymn,

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.

The question for all of us is, *Do you want to be made well?*

**May we,
like the lame man,
have the courage to rise up and walk.**

Amen.

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