

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale  
Date: May 26, 2019

21:12

Do You Want to Be Healed?  
John 5:1-16

Today's gospel text is complicated. The story is rather straightforward. Jesus shows up. A man gets healed. But as we peel back the layers to really understand this text, I find it to be one of the most challenging to live into and live by. So let's dive in.

Jesus has gone Jerusalem for a religious festival. He arrives at the pools of Bethzatha, also called Bethesda or Bethsaida which our gospel writer John describes as having five porticoes or covered areas or walkways, an important architectural feature in a desert climate. These pools were known for having miraculous healing powers.

But what exactly happened there is both under dispute and a mystery. What you can't tell from your scripture in your bulletin this morning is that the passage from John this morning, chapter five verses 1 through 9, is actually incomplete. You actually don't have verse four in the text in front of you. Why not this verse?

Well to make a very long story short, the Bible has been translated and retranslated many times and often scholars go back to the oldest surviving copies of books as they are the most reliable. The oldest copies of our the gospel of John do not have verse four. It was added sometime after the gospel was written around 110 CE and before 220 CE.

[None of the best and most ancient manuscripts have these words which accordingly, have not been retained in the A.R.V. On the other hand, Tertullian (about 145-220 A.D.) already shows that he knows this passage: "An angel, by his intervention, was wont to stir the pool at Bethsaida. They who were complaining of ill health used to watch for him; for whoever was the first to descend into these waters, after his washing ceased to complain' (On Baptism V)."238]

And what does verse four say: "they were waiting for the stirring of the water for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water. Whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had."

Aha! These people were waiting for the angel to show up and stir the pool giving it miraculous healing powers. Then they could push and shove each other out of the way to get to the pool first and be healed.

But wait a minute, this already seems bizarre. Does God really heal someone because he can push and shove and bully his way into the pool first?

"Can you imagine the pushing, shoving, and tripping that takes place as every ailing person desperately strives to be the first into the water? What chaos there would be! And then, even if one person was healed, it would not be the most needy person, because the one with the smallest ailment would be the most likely one to reach the pool first. The most needy person would be the least likely to get into the water first. Therefore, the least needy would probably be the one cured, while all the rest struggle to get out of the pool, get back to their "stations," and await their next chance." (Robert Deffinbaugh, bible.com)

Doesn't sound very much like what we expect from a God of love to me.

So if there is no angel, what's up with the pools? What some scholars have thought is that "the pool of Bethesda, like many similar pools in the Jerusalem area, is an intermittent spring. At times water is released in surges from hidden reservoirs in the hills around the city, causing these springs to rise and fall suddenly." (William Loader) Hence the bubbling water and stirring of the pool. And perhaps this bubbling source, perhaps also laden with minerals, could have been of benefit to some folks with arthritis or other maladies that do find ease from that kind of treatment. Sort of an early hydrotherapy or godly hot tub.

But there is one man who has been there for 38 years and has not been healed. He cannot get to the pools. Someone always gets there first. It is an insurmountable barrier.

But let's back up for a moment. When Jesus arrives he goes and talks to this one man. Why him? Why this one person? Why offer healing to this one and not all the others? Could it be this man had an openness, a willingness that Jesus could see or sense? Could it be Jesus just wanted to do a random healing that day? Could it be Jesus only had enough energy to heal one person before slipping away again? Could it be great compassion for a man who had suffered for so, so many years? We don't know.

Jesus approaches him, knows he has been there a long time, and asks the man "do you want to be made well?" Do you want to be made well? It seems like an obvious question. Of course he does or why else would he be here at the pools.

Do you want to be made well? On second thought, Jesus' question is a deep and potentially difficult one.

This man has lived his years as someone unable to engage in regular life at that time in history. He has not been able to provide for his family, assuming he has one. He has not been allowed in the temple (no one with any disability was). He would have been reduced to begging, or a charity case. For thirty eight years, most of his life, his world was narrowed to lying in wait for a miracle of someone helping him into the pool at the right miraculous time. This is much more about being restored to his society, restored to the community, than being able to walk.

Do you want to be made well? Does he? Would you? It is not an easy question. There would be just as many, if not more, barriers in his life if he was healed. Restarting his life, finding work, always being seen as an outsider, leaving the sanctuary that had been his home for so long. How had the world changed in all that time?

Do you want to be made well?

The man does not answer Jesus' question. He says "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." The man says his barrier is that he doesn't have any help. How could he possibly manage himself? "No one will help me. I can't do it." But he never answers Jesus' question: do you want to be made well?

Rachel Naomi Remen shares this story about her father. "For many years I tried to persuade my father to buy a new living room couch. Year after year, the old green couch grew shabbier and shabbier. Finally I was no longer safe to sit on. Embarrasses, I told Dad that I had ordered a new couch from Macy's by phone. I was sending a photograph of it for their approval. If they liked it, it would be delivered by Friday. They loved it.

"Saturday I called. How did it look? Shamefacedly, my father told me he had canceled the order. It turned out that he didn't know what to do with the old couch. I suggested calling Macy's and telling them to take it away. He told me they didn't do that in New York. Then how

about the Salvation Army? Apparently they only took away things they could still sell. With a sinking heart, I suggested looking in the yellow pages for someone who does hauling. But Dad didn't want a stranger to know how to get into his home.

"Finally I was silenced. My father, unaccustomed to letting go of anything, could not find his way to accepting my gift. Several years later, in the night, the old couch collapsed in on itself. It stood in the living room that way until my father died and I brought my mother to live with me." (Kitchen Table Wisdom)

Do you want to be made well? Do we want to be made well?

This isn't a scripture text about whether prayers are answered or whether God can heal us. This is a deep question for us that is much more about what we are willing to let go of, give up on, forgive or change in order to let healing in.

Jesus' answer to the man is not a healing prayer. Instead he says, "stand up, take your mat and walk." Then we wait. In this pause, truly the most dramatic moment in the story, the long, long moment of silence between what Jesus says and what the man decides to do, we wait to see what will happen. Can he reach around the barriers of life over these last 38 years, to hear what Jesus is saying to him? Can he believe and stand up? Does he want to?

The man by the pool could have just as easily said to Jesus, "how can I possibly walk having been here these 38 years." Or "I don't have anyone to help me stand up." Or "I am too afraid to hope for healing after all these years of disappointment." Or "I am just happy with the way my life is right now." Jesus gives the man the choice. This is important. Jesus doesn't just randomly heal people without their permission. He asks. Do you want to be made well? A hard question. What will the man do? Is there willingness to be healed?

At last, the man stands, picks up his mat and walks. He walks. He walks right through the barriers of doubt and tradition. He walks through the barriers of fear and change. He walks through the barriers of despair and what his life used to be. He stands, picks up his mat and walks.

Do you want to be made well?

There are many barriers in our lives. Some are outside of our control. Some are within our own hearts. I know that not all people are cured, but all people can be healed. I know that sometimes our best plans fall apart, and I do think sometimes God desperately calls to us, "wait, no, don't go that way."

And it is not like this man is particularly worthy of being healed. The text makes that clear, too. One commentator said this might be the least grateful of all of Jesus' healings. For when he is stopped by the religious authorities he says he doesn't know Jesus' name but then goes and when he meets up with Jesus again, the man tells the authorities Jesus' name. He rats Jesus out for healing him! Even after Jesus tells him to not sin any more. Which is not a threat that God will strike him with paralysis again, but that the man would be asked about the healing and would he choose to give Jesus name or not.

Perhaps our understanding of sin becomes closer to that of the first century if we think of it as actions that erode trust between people (or between a person and God).

Would he remain healed, and I mean in an internal, soul-deep way?

Not all barriers can be crossed. There must be willingness. Willingness to risk, and willingness to heal. Willingness to let go of the past and to trust in a different future. Willingness to release what scares us with a faith in God's ability to catch us and not let us fall.

Not all barriers can be crossed. Sometimes the message we still get is "no." A no from others who refuse our offers of help. A no from those who will not release past grudges and accept our confession or our forgiveness. And sometimes even we seem to get the answer to a prayer that is also a no, a no from God who says I cannot move you in that way.

When Jesus asks us, "Do you want to be healed?" we should hear it as, "Do you want to be restored to your right relationships?"

Recent scientific research found that carrying anger into old age is associated with higher levels of inflammation and chronic illness. Another study found that anger reduces our ability to see things from other people's perspective.

"Holding onto a grudge really is an ineffective strategy for dealing with a life situation that you haven't been able to master. That's the reality of it," said Dr. Frederic Luskin, founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project.

Do you want to be healed? Do we want to be healed?

Dr. Lissa Rankin wrote in an article in Psychology Today about the difference between being cured and being healed. She says, "Curing means "eliminating all evidence of disease," while healing means "becoming whole."

She continues, "When you need an antibiotic for that strep throat, by all means, go to your doctor...When you throw out your back, call your chiropractor..When your husband cheats on you, get thee to a therapist, if therapy resonates with your spirit. Go ahead and seek cure.

"And don't forget about preventative health. Get your Pap smear, mammogram, and colonoscopy. Get your blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose levels checked.

"But unless you do the deeper work, these things are only Band-aids. Healing goes to the heart and changes everything, if you approach it the right way.

"My vision for medicine is to create a huge healing round table at which you, as the patient, sit alongside those of us whose healing services you seek out. You are a vital, valued member of that healing round table and, in my opinion, your voice matters most. You get the seat of honor. The rest of us all have tools in our toolboxes, for sure. And when we gather our tools together from different disciplines in a loving, collaborate, integrative way, with you at the center of our efforts, magic can happen.

"But only if you are an active participant."

Do you want to be healed? Haruki Murakami, writer, penned, "What happens when people open their hearts?"

"They get better." ( Norwegian Wood)

I believe in a God who watches over us and is sometimes able to reach us with messages of hope, of warning, and of love. I believe in the power of Jesus to heal our lives, through forgiveness, through hope, through peace. I believe in the power of the Spirit to bring us together in community and through our togetherness heal us individually and spur us to heal a hurting world.

Do you want to be healed? Amen.