

DO YOU WISH TO GET WELL?

John 5:1-18

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Her mind races back to a man sitting at one of the gates surrounding the Old City of Jerusalem. She remembers: **As I recently came out of the Old City into the noise of the lumbering buses jammed to the doors with Arabs and to the honking of irate, impassioned cab drivers, as I felt the bright sunshine which had been shielded by the walled, crowded, narrow streets of the Old City, a man sitting on the ground caught my attention. He was happily conversing with other beggars until a foreign tourist came by. At that point, all conversation ceased, and a hand was lifted as dark eyes silently pled for alms. The other hand pulled up a pant leg to make sure the already exposed ulcer – bright pink, glazed over with white purulent patches glistening in the sun – was not missed.**

My nurse's heart brought my feet to a halt. I wanted to bend down and shield the open wound from the dust sent flying by the traffic scurrying through the gate. His leg needed tending. It should be washed, medicated, and dressed by someone who cared. Why, unattended it would only eat away until it reached his bone, and then he could lose his leg!

Arrested by his plight, I stopped to gaze at his leg and look into the darkness of his eyes, until my friend gently took me by my elbow and propelled me toward our destination. I was a tourist, and I didn't know about these things. She then proceeded to tell me that this man did not wish to be made well. He made his living from his wound. No need to confront the complexities of responsibility as a citizen of Israel when one could merely sit down in the dust and dirt of Jerusalem and receive pity along with a few shekels.

My wounded beggar could have been healed. The hospital doors were open to him and medicine was available, but he did not wish to get well. As I looked back in curious fascination, I caught one last glimpse of someone less than what he could have been. (*Stories For The Heart, Kay Arthur*)

The man did not wish to get well.

Jesus followed the practice of the pious men of his day by going up to Jerusalem to observe the festivals. There in Jerusalem, by the pool Bethesda, many sick people gathered. Tradition held that during a periodic disturbance of the waters, due – they thought – to an angel, the first one to enter the pool after such disturbance would be healed. So they sat there – waiting, waiting, and waiting – each hoping to be the speedy one, and, thus, to receive the healing.

It's a pitiful sight of sickness, of soreness and sadness. John introduces us to a certain man among the sick. He didn't tell us what the man's trouble was. But, from verse 8, it would appear to be

some sort of paralysis or lameness. It was a long-standing difficulty – in fact 38 years. Jesus seemed supernaturally to know the length of the man’s lameness.

I. Jesus takes the initiative.

This is the case every time we have a miracle in the Gospel of John, except for the healing of the nobleman’s son. Jesus does not wait for the man to approach him. He begins inquiring, “Do you wish to be made well?”

The man did not regard Jesus as a possible healer. He did not even know who Jesus was. His thoughts were all focused on the curative properties of the pool. He explains to Jesus that the reason he hasn’t been healed is that since he is lame, when the waters are troubled there is no one to put him into the water so that he may be the one to emerge well. Somebody else always beats him into the water.

Jesus commands the man, “Arise. Take up your pallet and walk.” Immediately he does so. The cure is instantaneous and complete.

But every time I read the story, I can’t get past Jesus’ question. It seems like a crazy question. “Do you wish to be made well?” Of course the man wishes to be made well. It seems like a ridiculous inquiry. And yet, every time I read it, I hear something very earnest and piercing about Jesus’ question. The man’s infirmity may, like our friend in the introduction, have been his livelihood. He may have been a beggar who used his illness to play on the sympathy of others. He may have adorned his neck with a sign that declared, “Will work for food,” knowing that it would be more likely that a passerby would take pity on him and drop their loose change into his offering cup.

It’s a fair question. “Do you wish to be well?” It’s a fact that many people do not wish to be cured of the circumstances that bring pain to their life. For example, the hypochondriac who, in some small way, really enjoys being sick and doesn’t want to be cured – doesn’t want to lose the manipulative power to control his family and his friends. As long as he is sick, he can call the shots, demand attention, and receive sympathy. He prefers the disease to the loss of his control, manipulation and attention.

There is the chronic counselee, who goes from counselor to counselor, therapist to therapist, telling the same story over and over again. They really are miserable – I don’t doubt that for a moment. But somehow they prefer the misery to confronting the issues.

Do you wish to be made well?

The question that Jesus asked, “Do you wish to get well?” is legitimate and necessary. To be cured of long-term, deep-seated problems, your desire can only be one thing – to get well, to be made whole, well spiritually. You cannot ride the fence. You cannot desire healing and cling to the disease at the same time. You cannot desire spiritual wellness and cling to your pet sin at the same time. We must decide – to get well or to stay sick.

Do you wish to get well?

What infirmity are you grasping with both hands, refusing to release to Christ Jesus? Sometimes, it's the oldest wounds that have the deepest scars. Is it the tragedy of experiencing the death of someone that you really, really loved – maybe even a long time ago? And, yet, somehow you refuse to begin to heal. You are spinning in circles – thwarted, stuck in your grief. And yet, is it not Jesus, who came to die Himself, that you may know that eternal life is available for those who believe in Him? Indeed, Jesus has done all He can do. He has conquered death itself by His resurrection. Was it not the Apostle who declares, “Oh death, where is your sting?”

Certainly, it is proper to grieve, and mourning is a must. But there are some of you who, despite the antiquity of the wound, refuse to be made well. You refuse to let the hope of the Resurrection overpower the despair of death. You refuse to let eternal life overshadow the brevity of this temporal realm. You refuse to let the Resurrection of Jesus comfort you in the face of the loss of a loved one. Maybe it's death from which you refuse to be healed.

Perhaps it's divorce. She left you. He left you. You feel abandoned and hurt, betrayed, demolished. The water has been under the bridge for so long now, and yet you refuse to let it go. He's not coming back. She's not coming back. You've got to decide to do life as you are. And you can do life as you are in a joyful, fulfilling way through Christ Jesus. Your joy in Christ is not dependent upon your marital status. No – the fulfillment that comes through being a son or a daughter of God is not conditional upon the faithfulness of your spouse. Do you wish to get well? Or has it been your demeanor for so long to pine over your divorce that you really – well, you don't see it, but you don't really wish to get well. What you want to do it to wallow in bitterness, to wallow in despair, to wallow in delusion – because you've been there so long that it's quite comfortable for you now.

For some of you, it's a great disappointment. Disappointment in a child. Disappointment in a career. Disappointment in yourself.

Do you wish to get well? God has given you the Gospel that allows you to forgive and forget – to move on – to go forward. And, yet, you stay there – stuck – a hummingbird that hovers and not an eagle that soars.

Yes, it's a fair question this morning. I'm not saying that you don't hurt. But I'm asking you, as Jesus challenged the lame man at the pool, “Do you wish to get well?”

II. Blaming others.

There is another thing that we see in this text, in verse 7. You can picture the situation in your mind – the crippled, the afflicted, surrounding the pool, staring anxiously, looking for the first ripple of the water, trying to concentrate, and then hurling themselves into the pool. The sick man's reply to Jesus reveals that he was too disabled to get himself into the water. He was dependent upon someone else. For this reason, he blamed his inability to get well on someone else.

Well, that's a convenient thing to do. Many of us blame our inability to get well, to be whole, on other people. When people of our generation are unhappy with life or the circumstances of life,

it's never their fault. It's always someone else's. We blame our parents. We blame our spouse, our ex-spouse. We blame politicians. We blame the economy. It doesn't matter what or who – we simply need a scapegoat.

Perhaps you were heard and were amused, as I was, several years ago when 61 year old Norman Mayo, a self-described milkaholic, sued the dairy industry claiming that a lifetime of drinking whole milk contributed to his clogged arteries and a minor stroke. He said he might have avoided his health problems if he had been warned on milk cartons about fat and cholesterol. The federal lawsuit named Safeway and the dairy farmers of Washington as defendants. Mayo is seeking reimbursement for all medical expenses and unspecified compensation for personal injury. "It's my opinion," Mayo says, "that the dairy industry's to blame. They push their dairy products without warning you of the hazards."

Perhaps Lyndon B. Johnson captured it best. "There are plenty of recommendations on how to get out of trouble cheaply and fast. Most of them come down to this: deny your responsibility."

Now, if you do wish to get well, you can't sit like the man at the pool of Bethesda and say, "It's not my fault." If you wish to get well, you must quit blaming others. Accept personal responsibility and do something about the problem that is crippling you.

I have realized that life, for most of us, is just about what we make it.

There once was an old man, a very wise man. Everyday he would sit outside a gas station in his rocking chair and wait to greet motorists as they passed through his small town. On this day, his granddaughter knelt down at the foot of his chair and slowly passed the time with him.

As they sat and watched the people come and go, a tall man who surely had to be a tourist – since they knew everyone in the town – began looking around as if he were checking out the area for a place to live. The stranger walked up and asked, "So what kind of town is this that we're in?" The older gentleman slowly turned to the man and replied, "Well, what kind of town are you from?" The tourist said, "In the town I'm from everyone is very critical of each other. The neighbors all gossip about everyone, and it's a real negative place to live. I'm sure glad to be leaving. It's not a very cheerful place." The man in the chair looked at the stranger and said, "You know, that's just how this town is."

An hour or so later a family that was also passing through stopped for gas. The car slowly turned in and rolled to a stop in front of where the older gentleman and his granddaughter were sitting. The mother jumped out with two small children and asked where the restrooms were. The man in the chair pointed to a small, bent-up sign that was barely hanging by one nail on the side of the door. The father stepped out of the car and also asked the man, "Is this town a pretty good place to live?" The man in the chair replied, "What about the town you are from? How is it?" The father looked at him and said, "Well, in the town I'm from everyone is very close and always willing to lend their neighbor a helping hand. There's always a hello and thank you everywhere you go. I really hate to leave. I feel almost like we are leaving family." The older gentleman turned to the father and gave him a warm smile.

“You know, that’s a lot like this small town.” Then the family returned to the car, said their thank yous, waved goodbye and drove away.

After the family was in the distance, the granddaughter looked up at her grandfather and asked, “Grandpa, how come when the first man came into our town you told him it was a terrible place to live and when the family came in to town you told them it was a wonderful place to live?” The grandfather lovingly looked down at his granddaughter’s wondering blue eyes and said, “No matter where you move, you take your own attitude with you and that’s what makes it terrible or wonderful.” (*Stories For the Heart*, retold by Kris Gray)

I might change the story a little like this: No matter what state you’re in, you take your own attitude with you, and that’s what makes it terrible or wonderful. Whether you’re single, whether you’re married, whether you’re divorced, whether you’re a widow, whether you are a widower, whether you have many children or none – no matter where you are in life, it’s your own attitude that makes it terrible or wonderful.

“Do you wish to get well?” Jesus asked.

III. Jesus is able.

Look at verse 8. Can’t you see the man now? “For 38 years I have been in this condition, and it all comes down to this – ‘Take up your pallet and walk?’” There must have been something about Jesus, His confidence, the authority of His words. There was something that made this man willing to attempt the impossible.

This is where the gospel begins. We’ve reached a place in our lives – many of us – where either we trust the power of God to alter our lives, or we don’t trust God. The man at the pool of Bethesda had to decide either I’ll get up or I won’t. Did he wish to get well? We can declare with the Apostle Paul – as we shout, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” – or we walk away without faith or hope. At some point we have to decide whether God can or cannot be trusted to do good by us.

Randy Reed, a 34 year old steel worker, was welding near the top of an almost completed water tower in south Chicago. Reed needed some supplies, but could not reach them from where he stood. So, he unhooked his safety belt – uh oh – and leaned from his scaffolding to grab a few items. The shift in his weight caused the platform on which he was standing to tilt. He tried to catch himself, but he fell 110 feet and landed in a pile of dirt near one of the steel tower legs. Someone called 911. Construction workers rushed to his side; paramedics arrived quickly, finding him still alive. They strapped him to the backboard and rushed him toward the ambulance. Randy suddenly opened his eyes, looked at his stretcher carriers and declared, “Please don’t drop me.” Now, that’s funny. Here was a man who had just survived a fall of 110 feet, but he was concerned about being dropped a couple of feet by paramedics. Later, doctors determined that he had suffered only – miraculously, it seems – a few bruised ribs.

We resemble that construction worker, don’t we? We trust God with our eternity, but we don’t know if we can trust Him with the right now of life, with the confusion we face. We talk about

security and trust and peace of mind, yet secretly we worry about the circumstances of life. The psalmist had the right view when he declared, “With your one hand you guide me, and with your strong hand you hold me securely.”

Do we wish to be well?

The sermon this morning isn't about being healed of your physical infirmities. I'm not saying that every terminal illness or every lame body will be healed if you will just will it so with faith in God. That's not what I'm saying, at all. We are all going to die, just as certain as we have been born. What I am saying is that it doesn't matter if your suffering is physical or emotional or spiritual or circumstantial. It does not have to enslave you or cripple you, break your spirit and rob your joy. By the power of God we can determine that we are going to pick up our pallet and walk back into spiritual and emotional health and well being.

You know the man cured by Jesus at Bethesda? He lived to die by some other disease or old age. He was not immune to human mortality. But what he did discover was that not even physical disease can conquer those who believe in the power of God to heal, protect and sustain them.

Do you wish to be well? I know one thing. Just like the man at Bethesda discovered – God has the power to make you well, if you truly wish to get well, if you'll take responsibility and quit blaming others, if you will trust the power of God to heal you.

Dare to pick up that pallet and walk. In fact, as I was studying the Gospel of John, I remembered the story of blind Bartimaeus. There, the blind man on the road to Jericho was crying out, “Son of David, have mercy on me. Son of David, have mercy on me.” Jesus asked Bartimaeus, “What do you want me to do for you?” Now Jesus obviously knew and could tell, as any of us could – even without supernatural abilities – that Bartimaeus was blind and that he ought to want to see. But Jesus asked the question. “What is it you want me to do for you?” It's another way of asking, “Do you wish to be well?”

Some of you here this morning have become accustomed in life to being sick, to being broken, to being depressed, to be disillusioned. It is not that I don't have compassion for you today or that I won't cry with you, because I'll be the first to do those things for you. But I still have to ask you the question, as Jesus posed it to the lame man. “Do you wish to be well?” Or have you become so accustomed to sitting by the pool of Bethesda – 38 years for him, how many for you – sitting in your broken state, waiting for somebody else to put you into the waters of wellness.

Jesus has that ability. He declares, “Arise and walk.”

No, I don't know what it is that brings you your suffering. But I know that Jesus can make you whole. He's done it time and time again, for many more broken than you. Jesus declared, “Arise.” He had the courage to stand up, and he was made well.

Perhaps the call comes for you today. Will you arise and walk? Do you wish to be made well?