

## Do You Want To Be Healed?

3 – Life Is A Miracle

Psalm 27

John 5:1-14,24-26

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Second Sunday in Lent

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The setting is a gathering of the needy, the sick, the blind, the poor, and the lame, alongside a pool in Jerusalem. They call it Bethzatha. It is one of the most clearly identifiable archaeological sites in Jerusalem, near the Lion's Gate, just off the Via Dolorosa, where now has been built the Crusader Church of St. Anne, and outside the church a garden where they have unearthed this pool, which, just as John states, "has five porticoes."

Alongside the pool lie bedraggled invalids, watching, waiting, on the ready alert, hoping to be the first into the water when, according to ancient tradition, once a year the waters are stirred and the first to reach them is healed. Legend says it was God working miraculously to move the waters. The movement was likely caused by underground hot springs that from time to time would bubble up.

As John records it, Jesus has moved, in one verse, from the second of his signs, the healing of a sick boy upon the pleading of his father in Cana. At the precise moment, of Jesus' word, the boy is healed off at another location, their home in Capernaum. Chapter four ends, "Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee." Chapter five begins, "After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem." Now he is in Judea again. The third sign is about to be revealed.

Three times a year Jews were expected to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem; Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. This is one of those mandated festivals, and a great crowd has arrived. Among the throng, lying there is a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years. It is to him this most pitiful example of human suffering, Jesus now turns and asks his question.

"Do you want to be healed?" It is a question we ask of ourselves and our church and our world in this season of Lent especially. Do we want to get well? Do we really? And are we willing to do what is necessary to get well?

### I

**A QUESTION IS ASKED.** "Do you want to be healed?" Thirty eight years, biblically speaking, is a full generation. The length of time the first generation of Israelites came out of Egypt and wandered in the wilderness without ever reaching the promised land. In Deuteronomy 2:14 we read this detail. "So we crossed over the Wadi Zered. And the length of time we had traveled from Kadeshbarnea until we crossed the Wadi Zered was thirty-eight years, until the entire generation of warriors had perished from the camp, as the Lord had sworn concerning them." After such a long time one pretty well expects life to continue in the direction one has established to this point. Routines are set. Little new, varied or different is expected. There

tends to be a sense of resignation, despair, even fatalism. “This is my destiny.” Not the expectation of anything fresh or new.

Once I had opportunity to preach the installation sermon for a friend at his new church in Louisiana. He was going into the pastorate of a church that had been deeply troubled for a long time, repeatedly infighting among themselves and disposing of one minister after another. As I was preparing for the service, I discovered the church then was thirty-eight years old. I used this text. And let me tell you I made some homiletical hay out of that detail, as I asked them, “So do you really want to get well?” And are you willing to do what is necessary to get well?” “Can a new generation arise?”

It has been said that

“Life’s supreme tragedy is not poor health, lack of wealth or beauty or great gifts, a disappointment in marriage or having a boring job, grievously hard as they may be to bear. It lies in the fading of our youthful vision, and our greatest sorrow is always the death of that sparkling spirit of wonder we possess as children, that deep joy in the world and in living, that pure faith and believing heart, the bubbling of the divine joy within us.”<sup>i</sup>

Much as Nicodemus responds to Jesus during his night visit, when Jesus tells him he must be born again spiritually from above, and Nicodemus turns it into a mathematical physiological impossibility, (how to enter again into his mother’s womb and be born;) so now the man on the mat with a sense of resignation says, “Made well, why, 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.”<sup>ii</sup>

Here is one thing you can count on - if you keep doing what you have always done you will keep getting what you have already got. We do that, don’t we? We keep doing the same things yet, expecting different results. An article from the Johns Hopkins Medical Journal states that, “Even after bypass surgery, half of smokers do not quit smoking. Even after a heart attack only about 1/3 of the victims who smoke stop.”

We stay in the same rut. We fear turning in a new direction. We are unwilling to try a new medicine, yet doing what we have always done, we expect some dramatically different result.

The man has been in his routine day-in-day-out all these thirty-eight years. Healing? How preposterous. His is the Presbyterian disease called, “Presbyopia.” A real word. The inability to see what is right in front of you. Day after day, the man comes to the healing pools, but he does not expect to be healed. He thinks he is fated to live out his days like this. A question is asked, “Do you want to be healed?”

## II

And then **A COMMAND IS GIVEN**. Jesus does not engage the man in argument on what has been, he issues a command on what to do now. “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”<sup>iii</sup>

Amazingly the man does just that. He obeys. He does not continue a verbal joust. He gets up, “At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.” Obeying Jesus’ command, everything suddenly changes.

He does not have full or even partial knowledge into who Jesus is. That will come later in his confrontation with the authorities. Yet there is such charisma about Jesus’ very presence that people respond on less than full cognitive awareness. Faith is stepping out - believing, though not fully being able to explain. Faith changes things for us, and for our world, when we do.

Recently a group of us on Wednesday nights studied a book by the Harvard theologian Harvey Cox called The Future of Faith. It is about how Christianity is moving in this new century, when we have become disestablished from the empire, and how we are more like the early church of the first few centuries. This was before Emperor Constantine made Christianity the approved state religion, more like the early church than ever before. Cox sees that Christianity is becoming less a system of belief, and more a matter of personal trust in Jesus, and a movement of the Spirit.

Cox notes that the most dramatic growth of Christianity today is taking place across the Southern hemisphere among Pentecostals. They tend to be among the poorer parts of the society and come to a faith that is dramatic, and calls for a clear choice to be made, conversion from going the ways of the world to going the way of the Lord. Cox notes that this dramatic turning is powerful in that it frees them from feeling they are locked into the economic and social structure into which they are born. They believe change is possible.

At the command of Jesus the lame man obeys, takes Jesus at his word and gets up, rolls up his bed to signify he is no longer going to be lying there waiting for a miraculous movement of the water or a handout. He is going to embrace the rest of his life as God’s gift, walking on his own two newly strengthened legs.

Jesus knows that part of healing is moving out of our isolation into community. This man has been so lonely all these years. He has not one friend to even get him to the waters where he can be healed. All alone, he just lies there at the pool, boring day after boring day, until he responds to the word of Jesus. A key part of healing is for us to be reintegrated back into the fellowship, welcomed back to the community around us. The word *healing* comes from the word *whole*. To be healed is to be returned into life, to be reconnected, to be made whole.

This is what Jesus’ bringing in this new Kingdom of God is about. Sickness, disease, injustice, oppression, these are not God’s intentions, nor, are they the payment individuals get for their sin. Jesus does not see sick people as responsible for their diseases, nor does he see sickness as part of God’s divine intention, but rather, Jesus sees sickness as the result of a kind of structural disarray in the cosmos to quote Cox. “It is to correct this disarray that he undertakes his mission and carries it out all the way to the cross.”<sup>iv</sup>

## III

**A QUESTION IS ASKED**, “Do you want to be healed?” **A COMMAND IS GIVEN**, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” And then **A CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE**. The man who has been lying there predictably, complacently, alongside the pool, is suddenly an activist racing around the streets of Jerusalem, overjoyed at his good fortune, when the Jews immediately sense a threat to their authority and slam on the brakes. “Sabbath violation! Sabbath violation! You are breaking the law by carrying your mat!” What irony that this man who previously could do no work, could do nothing but passively lie there day after day, is being charged with this picky little violation of a rule against carrying his mat on the Sabbath, as he is for the first time able to care for himself and his possessions.

These keepers of the status quo do not yet dare to get to the real root of their fear, that Jesus is who he is claiming to be - the divine Son of God. That will come later. For now, much as they got Al Capone for tax evasion, and Richard Scrushy for bribing the Governor, so now the man is being charged on a petty accusation with breaking the Sabbath by carrying his bed roll.

But this conflict will grow and grow in John’s gospel, as Jesus continues to teach and to heal in more and more dramatic ways. We too will face conflict in our lives if we follow Jesus. Will we get up and follow him? Will we trust him, knowing that to do so will mean some of our other commitments and priorities will be displaced? Some changes will be necessary.

The healing Jesus ultimately brings to this man and to the world will cost him his life. It will require that he be broken. For only a broken Christ can heal a broken world. The curse of the cross will become the blessing of salvation for the world.”<sup>v</sup>

Sir Thomas Brown, an eighteenth-century physician and theologian once described the mystery of Good Friday saying, “Ice splits starwise.” He was observing that if you tap a block of ice with a pick across the top it will send out fissures in all directions, like a star, and the ice will split in two from the center point of the star. The promise of the cross is that life can split starwise, from that cross.<sup>vi</sup> That new life involves conflict. The ice must be cracked. Do you want to be healed?

If you want to be healed, if you want be whole, you must embrace the gift of God in this Jesus, all he is, and all he does for us. You must exercise faith. “These things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

If you have been lying alongside a pool, stuck in the same old rut for a long time, here is the medicine you need to take for your healing. Here are the four steps you need to take.

- First**, give God a chance. Let God have space to work in your life. Ask God for what you need in prayer.
- Second**, believe that God will hear you. Take a leap of faith. Trust not only that God is, that God exists, but that God does in fact hear you and cares.
- Third**, be willing to wait patiently for the Lord. God’s time is not as our time. This man had to wait thirty-eight years for his healing; the Israelites had to wander in the

desert thirty eight plus two years to reach the Promised Land. Some prayers take a lot of time to be answered. Be patient and wait on the Lord.

**-Fourth**, when God speaks to you, gives you a signal like, stand up and take your bed roll with you, then do what God says. You probably will not hear him audibly, but God will communicate with you and send you his signs. If you are yearning for him, he will show you his sign. This miracle is the third of Jesus' signs, and the first to lead to confrontation.

John O'Donohue has written a wonderful poem called, "For Longing." I think it sums up well the yearnings for healing we all have, and which God ultimately wants to give us. Listen.

Blessed be the longing that brought you here  
 And quickens your soul with wonder.  
 May you have the courage to listen to the  
     voice of desire  
 That disturbs you when you have settled for  
     Something safe.  
 May you have the wisdom to enter  
     Generously into your own unease  
 To discover the new direction your longing  
     Wants you to take.  
 May the forms of your belonging – in love,  
     Creativity, and friendship-  
 Be equal to the grandeur and the call of your  
     soul.  
 May the one you long for long for you.  
 May your dreams gradually reveal the  
     destination of your desire.  
 May a secret Providence guide your thought  
     And nurture your feeling.  
 May your mind inhabit your life with the  
     Sureness within which your body inhabits the  
     World.  
 May your heart never be haunted by ghost-  
     Structures of old damage.  
 May you come to accept your longing as  
     Divine urgency.  
 May you learn the urgency with which God  
     Longs for you.  
 Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Leonard Sweet, Strong In The Broken Places, p.87.

<sup>ii</sup> John 5:6-7.

<sup>iii</sup> John 5:8

<sup>iv</sup> Harvey Cox, When Jesus Came To Harvard, p.180.

<sup>v</sup> Leonard Sweet, *ibid.* p. 248.

<sup>vi</sup> Leonard Sweet, *ibid.* p.248.