

Sermon: Do You Want to Get Well?

Rev. Dr. Donald W. Hackett
March 27, 2011
First Presbyterian Church

John 5:1-11
9&10:30am Sanctuary Worship
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Background

The gospel account we are examining today is one of those situations where a person was being asked to change. Let us read this encounter Jesus has outside the gates of Jerusalem with a man who has suffered for thirty eight years from a serious medical condition that left him helpless.

Text: John 5:1-15 *Jesus and the Invalid*

¹ Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁴ ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, **“Do you want to get well?”**

⁷ “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

⁸ Then Jesus said to him, **“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”** ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.” ¹¹ But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’” ¹² So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?” ¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, **“See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”** ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Introduction

As I looked at this passage, I was having a hard time entering the meaning of the story. I decided to enter the shoes of the man who encountered Jesus. With a storyteller’s sanctified imagination, I sought to discover how his life story might inform and enrich your life and my life journey with Jesus. Since this man is not named in this account, I am going to call him Tim. Let me introduce you to him.

Tim's Story

Good morning, my name is Tim. I was surprised when Don asked me to speak today. Oh, sure, I had a powerful encounter with this man, Jesus, but things did not turn out like you might think. Let me tell you about it. I was a healthy child until the age of seven when I got sick in a way that I never fully recovered. Our doctors did that best they could, but after the initial illness I could not move my legs. No matter what I tried, these legs would not move.

As a child and then a teen, I would sit at home and help with the family woodworking business. I could carve small items like bowls, salad forks, and little figurines. I got pretty good at it and felt like I was a part of the team. As the years went on, however, two things slowly occurred. First, both of my parents suffered long term illnesses and died. Secondly, during that time I started to lose feeling and full functioning of my hands. By the time I was thirty, I was a complete invalid with no family to help me. Some friends agreed to take care of me by feeding me and giving me a place to stay. Since I had no money, I could not go to the doctors anymore. The only healthcare option left for me was to go to a healing pool called Bethesda just outside the city walls.

The pool of Bethesda is a huge complex outside Jerusalem's Sheep Gate. There is a large pool that is fed by springs under the city. Around the pool are covered porches with immense columns. The place is always packed with blind, sick, and crippled people from all over the country. Why, you ask? It is believed that when the water bubbles up occasionally, it is actually an angel touching the water with healing power. The people that can get into the water first are the ones who have experienced healing! I have seen blind people get their sight back and lame people walk.

As you could imagine, it is a lot tougher for the paralyzed. How are we going to make it to the pool if no one is near to move us in? The bubbles come and go before I could get myself over to the pool. Did you ever try to pull yourself on the ground through a place that is littered with sick bodies all screaming for help? You get pushed aside. You get stepped on. People curse at you because they want to get there too. What a scene! While a few are bathing in the delight of healing waters, the rest of us are in still in the agony of unrelenting suffering. A person can lose hope in such a world.

One day that all changed for me in a way no one could have guessed. I was forty five at the time. My friends had brought me to the pool early that day, but I still could not get a spot near the edge of the pool. They put me under the shade of the porch so I would not be burned by the intense sun. I was sitting there, wondering why I even bothered coming anymore, when a man walks up to me. I could tell by his clothes he

was a country rabbi. He had his students close behind him. He stops, leans over, looks me straight in the eye, and asks, *“Do you want to get well?”*

I was caught off guard. I thought he was going to give me some money, food, or at least help me get over to the edge of the pool. But no, he has the nerve to ask me if I want to get well? I thought to myself, “What do you think I have been doing here for all those years? Getting a suntan?!” I bit my tongue because I could tell he was serious. I explained my situation. I told him I have no one to help me so when the water is stirred and someone always gets there ahead of me. I thought he might use his influence and get me a reserved seat near the pool or have one of his disciples stay with me to help. But no! Jesus yells a command at me! He said, *“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”* I was so startled. He spoke with such authority! I felt a tingling sensation all through my body. I grabbed my mat and pull myself up with newly formed muscles and strength. I did what he said. I stood up and started walking through the crowd amazed and in wonder. Who was that man? I turned around to look at him and he was gone.

As I wandered away from the pool, I decided to head up to the temple to join the Jewish holy day celebrations. On my way I was stopped by a man. He rebuked me for carrying my mat on the Sabbath. I had forgotten about that rule. I have not been able to carry anything for years. I explained that the man who had just healed me said, “Pick up your mat and walk.” They wanted to know his name. I did not know who he was. So they left me alone and I stored my mat by the door. A few hours later, the man who healed me found me in the temple. He said he was Rabbi Jesus. Then he said something that still haunts me today. Jesus said, *“See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”*

“See, you are well again.” Jesus was right. I was healed. My body was restored, strong, and I could walk again. I was now free to enter life in a way that had been denied me for years. I was healed and happy! Jesus did not stop there. He also said, *“Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”* Stop sinning. What was Jesus talking about? Jesus healed my body. Did he want to heal something else? Did he want to heal my heart as well? What sin patterns were in my life that he was seeing? I had become dependent on others over the years. Was that a sin? I did not have a choice in that one you know! I needed people to help me. I was a victim. Victims have rights you know. I deserved the help of every able bodied person. They owed me. Right? Was Jesus telling me to take responsibility for my life now?

Was it the resentment that had grown in my heart? I envied those people who could get up and go anywhere they wanted, anytime they wanted. I was stuck on a mat and they were free. I hated watching people walk, play, laugh and dance. Bitterness had grown in my heart. I think I was bitter and angry with God as well.

Why did he let that happen to me? Why did God not hear my prayer all those years? Why did he come now to heal me? My life is half over. I have a hard and resentful heart. Did Jesus want to change that too?

What I did next may surprise you. After Jesus identified himself to me and warn me to flee danger, I fled. I ran right back to those religious leaders and turned Jesus in. He was the law breaker, not me. He healed me and told me to carry my mat. He knew it was the Sabbath. I was the victim. He had set me up. Now I was getting even. I will take the healed body, thank you, but you keep your hands off my heart!

Reflection on John 5

This is my understanding of what happened in John 5. Jesus came to Tim to heal him, but Tim was unwilling to change the direction of his heart. Tim's story is not a new one. People are blessed by God every day, but choose to live in sinful, destructive patterns hurting themselves and others in the process. What is the good news here?

1. Jesus meets us where we are.

The good news for you and me is that Jesus meets us today right where we are. No matter where you are in life's journey, Jesus is there. You can be suffering in a hospital bed or having a wonderful walk outside. Jesus is there. At every decision point in our day, Jesus is asking us, "Do you want to be well?" Tim in the story never answered Jesus' question. He did not decide to become well. Do you and I want to be whole? Do we want to live in a pattern and rhythm that blesses us and others? I find this question presents itself when I am thinking about the food I am choosing to eat. Will I eat in a healthy way or will I have a sugar splurge? Do I want to be well? Food plays a big role in that! How about my relationships with people? Will I call that person with whom I am in conflict? I rather not, but do I want to be well? Wellness has to do with healthy relationships as well. Chew on Jesus' question this week. Write in on a card and put it on you mirror, near your phone, or on your refrigerator. Do I want to be well?

2. Jesus gives us power to make the next step.

Once we decide to get well in any aspect of our lives, Jesus is there to help us. The secret of the Christian journey is allowing God to help you step by step. Tim could not get up and walk by himself. Jesus needed to heal him first. You and I cannot break away from our sin patterns on our own. We need to invite Jesus to come and address our unhealthy relationships with power, food, sex, and money. We need Jesus penetrating our thoughts and hearts if we want to be free from gossip, bitterness, or lust. Once the Holy Spirit has helped us identified an area that needs healing, our repeated prayer is: "Jesus, come and forgive me. Make me whole. Help me take the next step."

3. *Jesus gives us others to help us.*

God loves those kinds of prayers. Before the words are off our tongue, the Holy Spirit is preparing all the resources for you and me to succeed.

- As you read and reflect on the Bible, God will guide to you to those passages that will guide and encourage you.
- As you go through your day, God will bring people in your life that can help you if you let them.
- As you pray in the car or as you walk, Jesus will whisper ideas to give you wisdom in the decisions you have each day.
- As we call on the Holy Spirit, you will see God arrange circumstances to help you and so you can help others. God is at work all around us if we open our eyes to really see.

Let us pray:

Jesus, here we sit like Tim the Invalid, in need your healing power. Come and lift us out of our sin and destructive ways of living. Place us in the center of your healing, hope, love and joy. Help us to follow you this week, one step at a time. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so we can bless others in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Charge:

Two challenges for this week:

1. **Meditate on the question “Do I want to be well?”** and allow God to lead you into your next steps of healing.
2. **Find one person to pray for every day this week.** There is a person who needs your prayers.

A Disciple's Focus

Be always joyful, thankful, humble,
and eagerly responsive in Jesus
by keeping myself spiritually centered, emotionally rested,
physically fit, intellectually sharp,
relationally connected, financially responsible,
and vocationally effective.