

August 5, 2007
Do You Want to Get Well?
John 5:1-15

In Jerusalem there was a pool where the sick and infirmed gathered day by day hoping for a miracle. It was said that an angel stirred the water from time to time and the first person to step into the water after the angel's stirring would be healed. Did you notice that around the pool "a great number of disabled people...the blind, the lame, the paralyzed" (v.3) waited for the stirrings of the water?

When Jesus came into Jerusalem apparently the first place he visited was the place where all these sick people were lying around. Wow! Jesus didn't visit a friend for a quick bite to eat. He didn't look up an old buddy so that he could relax a bit before he began his work. No, the first thing Jesus did upon entering Jerusalem was to visit the sick.

What an incredible moment. In the ancient world it was thought that the sick and infirmed had somehow done something to merit their situation. In contrast the well and the prosperous had done something to merit God's favor. By visiting and caring for the weak and sick, Jesus helped people to understand that in a fallen world innocent people sometimes suffer. What encouragement we should receive from this passage! Jesus cares about the sick and the hurting of the world.

Everyone at the pool had serious needs. Day after day they came to the pool praying that this might be the day when God would heal their broken bodies. One man had been waiting for thirty-eight years for healing. He was an invalid and was unable to help himself into the pool. Perhaps Jesus cast his eyes in this man's direction because this man was the most tragic figure of all those who were present around the pool. In truth we simply do not know why God decided to help this man. It is not like Jesus loved this man above all the rest. God sees all the broken people of this world but for some reason this man was singled out.

I suppose there are a good many people here this morning who are broken as well. Maybe you are not broken so that other people can see your brokenness. A good many of us are quite adept at camouflaging our pain, but just the same your life is not what you want it to be. There are places inside of you that cry out with pain. Painful memories that you cannot forget haunt you day after day. Perhaps a failed marriage nags you constantly making you feel like a failure. Perhaps an addiction of some sort lurks just beneath the surface of your life creating within you feelings of inferiority. Perhaps you have committed some sin that continues to crowd out the goodness of God. While on the outside your friends and loved ones think that everything in your life is fine, on the inside you are wallowing in a pool of self-pity. You are an emotional cripple and your life is not what you want it to be at all. Strange how life throws curves at us.

Norman Cousins tells the wonderful story of a man who hurried into a phone booth to make an urgent call after his cell phone went dead. Unfortunately, when the man slipped his quarter into the phone, nothing happened. He was able to reach the operator and explained to her what had happened.

The operator said that if he would send a card with his name and address to the phone company they would be happy to refund his quarter. The man quite heatedly said that he didn't care about the quarter; he only needed to make a call. Could she help him? The operator repeated that he needed a quarter to make a call. The man shouted, "I lost my quarter in this phone booth." Again the operator explained that if he would fill out a card with his name and address the company would gladly refund his money.

Exasperated, the man hit the phone hard with his fist and was stunned to see quarters falling out of the phone. The quarters kept coming and coming. Dozens of quarters poured out of the phone. The operator asked the man what had happened and the man joyfully explained that quarters were pouring from the machine.

The operator asked the man to kindly put the quarters back into the machine as the money was not his. I love what the man said. He sweetly told the operator that if she would fill out a card with her name and address, he would gladly send her the money.

Life certainly contains a lot of surprises, both good and bad. The life we planned is seldom the life we get. We make bad decisions, we fall victim to temptations, we abuse our bodies and in all of our failures there are consequences to pay. Sometimes the consequences cripple us—emotionally, physically or spiritually. When we find ourselves wallowing beside a pool of self-pity, mourning our past failures, lost opportunities and poor choices, what do we do?

The first thing that Jesus said to the man who had been infirmed for thirty-eight years was “Do you want to get well?” Jesus’ question may seem like a rather silly question at first. Of course the man wanted to be well. He’d been an invalid for thirty-eight years. How could he not want to get well? Yet, Jesus shows great insight into human nature by asking the question. The truth of the matter is that not everyone wants to get well. Some people enjoy living in their pain and misery.

The Prodigal Son story that Andrew dramatized so wonderfully a few minutes ago illustrates this very point. The young son living in squalor in a far country came to his senses, but many people do not. They can leave the pigsty any time they choose, but they choose to live with the swine rather than take responsibility for their lives.

Years ago there was a middle-aged man who attended the church I served. I learned that he did not work and thought that maybe he was independently wealthy and was surprised to learn that was not the case. One day the man came to see me and explained that the doctor had told him he had a heart condition. The man interpreted the doctor’s comments to mean that he should not work at all and had thus retired from work. I asked the man how long it had been since the doctor had given him that news. He responded that eleven years ago the doctor had informed him of his precarious health.

Every time we asked this man to do something in the church, he always commented that he couldn’t on account of his health. I stayed as pastor of that church for seven years and all during that time the man was forever telling me about his bad health. In virtually every conversation I had with him he would mention that he only had a short time to live. I left the church in 1987. Four years ago I heard that he had finally died. For over thirty years the man had lived his life complaining about how poor his health was.

It is not my place to judge, but I can’t help but wonder if this man sort of relished his poor health. Perhaps he enjoyed wallowing in feeling sorry for himself. As long as he could complain about how sick he was he didn’t have to be responsible or accountable. He always had a convenient excuse whenever anyone asked him to do something. There are some people who simply don’t want to get well.

Whatever demons you may be wrestling with the question Jesus asks you is “Do you want to get well?” Do you want to be accountable for the way you live? Do you want to take responsibility for your actions? If your answer is “yes,” then you are on your way to recovery.

But there is another question this text asks us this morning: Will you confess that you need help? The poor invalid in this story acknowledged that he needed help. “I have no one to help me,” he said. The man admitted he needed help. He couldn’t cure himself.

The Prodigal Son, too, recognized that he needed help. He couldn’t fix things himself. So he decided to go to his Father for assistance.

I am amazed how often people believe that they can heal themselves. If they’re sick, they refuse to go to the doctor. If they are having marriage problems, they decline to see a marriage therapist. If they have problems they can’t resolve, they decline to see a professional.

The fact is God uses other individuals to help heal us. Moses was chosen by God to help deliver the people Israel. God called people throughout the Old and New Testament to help his people in a variety of ways. God calls doctors and other professionals to assist us with problems that we cannot solve ourselves.

And even when others cannot help, God is always there to help. He cares about you more than you can possibly know. God desires to help heal the pain within you. “Cast all your troubles upon God for he truly cares for you.”

What do we do when we find ourselves living a life of self-pity? First, we have to answer the question “Do you want to get well?” Second, “Will you confess your need for help?” But this passage asks one more question of us: “Will you change your ways?”

Notice when Jesus meets the man a little bit later in the story he tells the man to “Stop sinning” (v. 14). In other words, Jesus tells the man to change his ways. True healing will never take place unless we change our ways. We must decide to stop doing whatever it is that is causing us so much pain. It amazes me that so many people cannot quit doing the very things that are destroying their lives. Throughout the Gospels the first step in following Jesus is to “repent.” Jesus insists that we must be willing to change our ways, our habits, whatever destructive patterns of life we are following.

A man went to his doctor to have his physical. After the results came back the doctor told the man that his cholesterol was high, his blood pressure was at a dangerous level and he was way overweight. “Well,” said the man, “what is the best thing I can do

for my health?" The doctor told the man that he must quit smoking immediately; he must start eating a healthier diet and must exercise in order to lose weight. After hearing the doctor's recommendations the man said, "Well, what is the *second* best thing that I can do?"

Amazing! And you would be surprised how often people react in just this fashion.

Some years ago I visited with one of the leaders in a school district where I served as pastor. He confessed to me that he was having an affair and wanted help. Wanting help is a good thing so I told him that he must immediately end the affair and seek reconciliation with his wife. He looked me squarely in the face and said, "I can't end the affair." Over the next several years I visited with this man again and again. His lifestyle was causing him incredible grief, but he would not end his affair.

One day the funeral director called to tell me that the man had died of a massive heart attack. To this day I believe that the man's inability to end an immoral lifestyle precipitated his death. Unless we turn our backs on the patterns of life that seek to destroy us, they eventually will.

John's story ends with the man going about town telling people that Jesus had made him well. Indeed, the man had changed his ways. And in changing his ways, he changed his life. God can surely help you, but you must also help yourself.

A friend of mine had serious heart surgery several years ago. One day several days after his surgery he met with his surgeon. He asked his doctor what kind of quality of life he would have now that he had had open heart surgery. The doctor looked rather surprised at the question. "What do you mean what kind of quality of life will you have? I fixed your heart," the doctor said. "The quality of life is up to you."

If you can answer "Yes" to these three questions, "Do you want to get well? Will you confess your need for help? And will you change your ways?" God will give you a new heart. The rest is up to you. Amen.