



Rev. Chris Taylor - 5-26-19

"Courage to Change"

Psalm 67 and John 5:1-9

Jesus question to the lame man comes as something of a surprise, "Do you want to be made well?" The commentaries talk about the importance of Jesus connecting with the man, but I can think of better ways to make that initial connection. How about, "Hi, I'm Jesus. What's your name?"

Instead, Jesus – a complete stranger to the man – suddenly appears in front of him and asks, "Do you want to be healed?" The guy had been lying there thirty eight years. What does Jesus think he wants?

When our tour group was in the Jerusalem's old city back in November, we saw the pool and what remains of its five porticoes. Right beside it is a structure built in the second century that archaeologists have called a healing sanctuary. The construction of that sanctuary so close to Jesus' own time suggests that this was indeed the site of the miracle described here in John's gospel.

Our best guess is that there was some kind of fissure at the bottom of the pool that allowed trapped, subterranean gases to occasionally escape and bubble up to the surface. People of Jesus' day took the bubbles as a sign that an angel had entered the pool and stirred up the waters. They believed the first one to step in would be made well.

Think about what Jesus' visit to the pool tells us about him. He had just come in to Jerusalem for one of the great festivals, and where does he go? He didn't go to the temple, or to Herod's palace or to the home of one of Jerusalem's wealthy and influential citizens. He went to this pool surrounded by the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed. The pool was about the closest thing to what we would call a hospital.

The first thing Jesus did was go to the sick and the needy. And isn't that pretty much what we see him doing all through his ministry? After his sermon on the mount as he is coming back down the side, a leper approaches him. Jesus stops, and heals him (Mt. 8:1-4). When he visit the country of the Gerasenes and encounters someone so wild and uncontrollable he is ordinarily left chained up among the tombs, Jesus turns to him and casts out the demons (Mk. 5:1ff). When John the Baptist sent his followers to ask if he was the Messiah, Jesus didn't point to the size of his army or the eloquence of his words. No, he said,

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. (Mt. 11:5-6)

What did Jesus say would serve as the one, great sign that we are his followers? "By this," he said, "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:35). By our love, and if we are following Jesus' example, then it is always going to be a love directed towards those on the fringes – the poor, the blind, the lame. It is going to be directed towards those with the greatest need.

Do you remember what Jesus said would be the criteria for judgment on the day of his return? "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... for in as much as you did it to one of the least of these my [family], you did it to me" (Mt. 25:35-36, 40).

We shouldn't be surprised, then, that the first thing Jesus does on this visit to Jerusalem is to go what essentially served as the hospital in that time. This is where the needy were. This is where love could have its greatest impact.

Arriving at the pool of Bethzatha it may be that someone pointed out this one particular man and shared his sad story of waiting by the pool for thirty eight years. We don't know. Certainly, his must have been one of the saddest stories of anyone there. Thirty eight years! That's almost an entire life; a life spent watching others make it into the healing waters ahead of him. "Sir," he said, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up..."

Which brings us back, then, to Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" Our first thought is "of course he does, that's why he's been waiting there." But it is certainly possible that that wasn't the case; possible that he had become used to the way things were.

There is something in us that doesn't like change. Years ago, in an article that appeared in the Harvard Business Review, Rosabeth Ross Kanter offered ten different reasons why people resist change. While she offers some background on each, I'm just going to list them here: 1) loss of control; 2) uncertainty; 3) being surprised by it; 4) everything seems different; 5) loss of face; 6) concerns about competence; 7) more work; 8) ripple effects; 9) past resentments; and 10) sometimes the threat is real.

You listen to that and you get a sense of how complex the issue of change is; how many forces are working against it. The field of psychology has a word for it: homeostasis – the preservation of what already is (and corresponding resistance to change) whether it is our body temperature or our family dynamics.

Think about that lame man. Thirty eight years he had been there! But this was the life he had come to know. He had adapted. He had survived. He had a very clear identifiable place in the social structure. He knew who he was, and knew what was and wasn't expected of him.

Being healed would throw all that into chaos. It would be a step into a whole new kind of life. Was he up to it? Could he pull it off? What would happen to all the relationships with his family and with the other lame and crippled people there by the pool?

Jesus' question wasn't rhetorical. It wasn't just a way to reach out and connect with the man. There was good reason to wonder. We see it all the time in people we know: the couples who are struggling but one or both of them refuse to get any help; individuals who have some health issue but who refuse to make any changes – adjusting their work hours, reducing their stress, getting more exercise, changing their diet, or getting involved in a recovery program.

They are miserable, but just not miserable enough to really want to change. Really? Is that God's best for us?

Change is tough. It is hard work. It is scary. It means admitting that we aren't perfect. There is nothing easy or natural about any of this. Just the opposite.

Our natural inclination is resist it. But if, this morning, you are like that lame man lying by the pool – if you know your life is less than what you want it to be and realize you can't make the changes on your own – then know this: Jesus wants to help.

That's why he came. It is why he died. His heart is for people like us: people who don't have it all together; people who are struggling; people who have come to realize they need some help – the lost, the lonely, the sick, the broken, the bereaved.

Just as Jesus approached that lame man so long ago, so Jesus is approaching us this morning. He is asking each of us, "Do you want to be made well?" The journey towards wellness, towards wholeness, towards God's own shalom, begins when we say "Yes." It begins when we make the choice to turn away from what is past and turn towards him, take hold of his outstretched hand, and offer our lives in obedience to his will.