

April 15 – Do You Want to be Made Well?

John 5:1-18

Today's healing story is also a story of conflict. Before we are done with this tale, we will hear, for the first time, the desire of the Jewish leadership to kill Jesus. What could spark such a response? To answer that question let us go back through the story. Then, I want to spend time on the question that Jesus asked the man, a question he never really answers, but a question of significance for all of us.

Jesus is in Jerusalem for one of the festivals. We are not told whether it is Passover, Pentecost or Tabernacles. These are the three major pilgrim festivals in the Jewish year. He and the disciples had entered by the Sheep Gate where there was a pool. On occasion, the water would become agitated. It was believed that this was caused by an angel and if a person could be the first one into the water they would be healed. We learn of a man who had been ill for 38 years. This stresses the permanence of his affliction. We are not told what his infirmity is. We do not know if he has spent most of those years by the side of the pool hoping to be first one in so he could be healed or had recently come to this spot. All we know is that Jesus asks him, "Do you want to be made well?" This is the question we will return to. Interestingly the man does not answer. Instead he complains about how he has no help to get into the pool first. He doesn't know who Jesus is. He doesn't say he wants to be made well. Nevertheless, Jesus says, "Stand up, take up your mat and walk." Since there is an emphasis on his walking and his saying he needed help getting into the pool most people believe that he had been suffering from some sort of paralysis.

We now learn that this healing was on the Sabbath. The Jews, by which the writer of John means the Jewish leadership, not all of the people, tells the man it is not lawful for you to carry your mat. The man answers that the one who had made him well had told him to do this. They want to know who had encouraged him to break the law. Even though healing is allowed on the Sabbath, carrying your mat is not. They were concerned about laws instead of celebrating the healing work of God. Later Jesus sees the man in the Temple. Jesus says do not sin any more so that nothing worse happens to you. This relates to the idea of the time that physical afflictions were, at least in part,

the result of sin. The man then goes to the leaders and tells them that it was Jesus who had made him well. We want to put down the man for doing this. It feels as if he has turned on Jesus. We have this negative response because of what is to come. But the word used that we translate “tell” actually is better translated “proclaim.” The other times it is used in the gospel it is talking about the work of the Holy Spirit and is a positive thing. So more likely he announced that it was Jesus who had made him well, as a declaration of love and devotion, not as one turning him in. They start persecuting Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus says, that as “my father is working I also am working.” The leaders see him as a Sabbath breaker and making himself equal with God and so they plan to kill him. It is a story about God at work and laws of man being broken. It is being more concerned with making sure the right things are done instead of celebrating the work of God.

Now I want to go back to that unanswered question: “Do you want to be made well?” We think that is a silly question. He has been sick for thirty-eight years. Of course he would want to be healed. But healing would change everything. He had a role, a place, a status. Did he really want to change? Yes it was as a sick man laying beside a pool, but he had found a way to stay alive. If he was made better he would have to work, to be responsible. Did he really want all of life to change?

It is really a question all of us are asked, at times. Many of us carry with us bits and pieces of brokenness in our lives. We have sometimes carried them for as long or longer than this man who encountered Jesus. We remember a time of rejection or betrayal and those memories are still affecting interactions today. We might be angry that we took the wrong path when life’s journey came to a fork in the road. We continue to relive what might have been. Or we experienced great loss and still feel the bitterness of unfulfilled dreams. Sometimes we are just frustrated with life. Things have been moving forward in ways that upset us. We now live in a technologically driven world, we see values changing, and new understandings occurring that challenge some of our cherished beliefs. We don’t like it and the frustration with today causes us to push back at people and life. We come to worship asking God to forgive us, renew us and lead us to new life. We are challenged to forgive, forget and let go. Yet still we silently hang on.

We are like the man beside the pool. We say we don't want to be sick but then blame all of life's circumstances for why we are not getting better.

Do we really want to be made well, to find wholeness? Or are we secretly content laying beside the pool hoping for healing, complaining that it doesn't happen, and blaming God and others for our circumstances. God asks us what we really want. To be made spiritually whole we have to let go of some memories, we have to move on to find new life. Are we ready? It is a serious question, one that all of us have to answer.

If the answer is yes there are at least three things we need to do spiritually to allow Jesus to heal us. The first of these is opting out of the blame game. We can't get emotionally and spiritually well as long as we are blaming others for the mess we are in. Yes, the actions of others might have caused the situation we are now dealing with but that is still past history. Today we have to decide what we are going to do. We have to make decisions about today. Blame leads to inaction. Do you see yourself, at times, like the man by the pool? He had been there a long time and he was blaming others for not helping him. We blame as well.

The second thing we need to do is release the past and its power over us. Too often we are still making life choices today based on past events instead of current realities. We struggled with this for a long time in our family related to my mother. She was upset that the grandchildren did not thank her for birthday and Christmas presents. Now you need to understand that it wasn't that they didn't thank her but they didn't do it the way she wanted. She expected a hand written note mailed to her. Getting a phone call or an email didn't count. We finally convinced her that young people today rarely write letters and to accept the thanks she did receive. Once she embraced this reality a lot of wasted anger at her grandchildren and by implication, us their parents for not teaching them correctly, dissipated. It was hard to let go of the past. This is one small thing, but I believe we all see those places we have to let go of past expectations, events and failures and instead focus on today.

Finally to be made well means forgiving and forgetting. Releasing old hurts, understanding that there will likely never be resolution, at least to our satisfaction, is

hard. We want to hear the “I’m sorry” or the promise “I’ll never do it again.” Sometimes it doesn’t happen and we let those past events stick in our lives like a pebble in our shoe and with every step in life’s journey that pain annoys us and keeps us from the new.

My dad liked to tell this somewhat humorous but sad, as well, story. When he became pastor of a church he was told soon after arriving that two women would never sit on the same side of the church, serve on the same committee or help at the same events. He learned that some years before, probably at least five but maybe even ten, on an Easter one of the women wore a big floral hat to church. She had fallen in love with it and could not wait to show it off. The other woman had, she thought out of ear-shot, exclaimed that that hat was about the ugliest thing she had ever seen. The words were heard and the first woman stomped out of church not even waiting for Easter services. She told everyone how the words had hurt her and how this woman was the most unchristian person ever. The second woman, hearing how she was being belittled by the first over a comment on fashion, joined the fray saying how petty the first woman was. Many years later the battle continued and it hurt the church. If you were friends with one, the other immediately rejected you. It was a challenge for my father to try and be pastor to both. If you had asked them if they would like to put this behind them they would have answered yes, as soon as the other admitted that they were totally wrong!

Quit blaming, releasing and forgiving are hard. Do we want to do those things that make us well?

This encounter between Jesus and the man was all about God’s grace and love in action. Those around them turned it into a petty fight over rules. It got so out of hand that some decided that even though Jesus was a healer he should die. Rigidly hanging on to rules, not letting go of the past, not embracing the new are things that we can all be guilty of. God calls us to new life. Do we have the faith to embrace the healing Jesus offers each of us for all those places we find we are sick of soul?