

Imagining Wellbeing
John 5:1-9
May 6, 2022
A Sermon for Every Sunday

“Do you want to be made well?” Jesus asked the man who had been living as an invalid for 38 years. Do you want to be well?

Usually people were begging Jesus to heal them, to cure them from whatever illness had taken hold. Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus to heal their brother. Blind Bartimaeus yelled to Jesus from the crowd. A paralyzed man’s friends climbed up on a thatched roof, pulled back the bound grasses and lowered the man down to Jesus. The father of a boy who had seizures begged Jesus to do what his disciples could not do. The gospel stories tell us that often the crowds would press in on Jesus just so they could touch him and receive healing through even the hem of his tunic. People went to great lengths to get this healer’s attention.

But not this man.

Curious, isn’t it?

38 years of chronic illness, yet, he didn’t cry out to Jesus from among the sick and infirmed who were lying around the porticoes at the Sheep Gate. He had no friends to bring him to Jesus. No parent to beg on his behalf. He didn’t seek out Jesus at all, but rather, Jesus sought him out, asking: “Do you want to be made well?”

The answer seems obvious - of course he wants to be made well. Why else would he even be there?

Curious indeed.

The desire for healing is the obvious reason so many were gathered in that place that day. For the crowd of people suffering from illnesses, their last and desperate hope for healing was found in the pool. Archeologists have actually uncovered the reservoir which formed the pool and alongside it a faded fresco with a picture of an angel troubling the water. You see, there was a legend about the pool. The story goes that an angel would periodically come down from above and stir up the water. Afterwards, the first person to step into the pool was healed from their sickness.

Imagining this one man's lifetime of suffering alongside the collective suffering of the crowd at the pool is heartbreaking. The enormity of their pain and distress is almost more than we can comprehend. Navigating a life with illness, disease, and disability is difficult and complex. From our own frames of reference, we feel for their pain. But we don't just sympathize with them, our hearts also break for the injustice of their situation. They are essentially in a large waiting room, looking for signs of the water moving in the pool, and then racing against the others to get to the pool first – to secure their own healing over and above anyone else's healing. There is no justice in such a system.

Call me a skeptic but this seems like a scam. The legend says it was an angel who would trouble the waters and make them ripe for healing but only for the lucky one, but there is nothing holy about this scheme.

Jesus bypasses it entirely. Which makes me suspect this healing is about more than only the one man's healing.

Jesus approaches the man asking: "Do you want to be made well." And the man lays out the helplessness and hopelessness of his situation. He answers Jesus,

saying: “I don’t have anybody to put me in the pool and when I try to get there on my own, somebody else just passes me by and gets there first.”

I guess he kind of indirectly answers Jesus’s question. I mean, he answers by telling Jesus how he has tried to participate in the scam of a system going on and how he’s been frustrated by it. He explains why the system hasn’t worked for him. Jesus doesn’t engage with that or respond to that, he simply says, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” And with that, the man participates in his own healing by doing just so.

And the story ends with a brief disclaimer that, oh by the way, this all happened on the Sabbath. Jesus was always making folks mad and breaking the rules that classified healing as one of the acts of labor forbidden on the Sabbath. The Sabbath-keeping rules started out with good intentions but they had begun to get in the way of God’s life-giving, liberating, work of creating a world that was, well, well. The rules were elevated above the people. And Jesus was always siding with the people over systems, especially the systems that kept them down.

By bypassing the whole healthcare system of the Bethesda pool, Jesus frees not only the man’s chronic illness but breaks open the crippling malady of participating in corrupt systems.

Walter Brueggemann describes the symbolism of Jesus’s actions calling it the prophetic task: “to maintain a destabilizing presence, so that the system is not equated with reality, so that alternatives are thinkable, so that absolute claims of the system can be critiqued.”

It is a miracle that the man is able to take up his mat and walk after being ill for 38 relentless years. It is also a miracle that Jesus invites him to see the

impossible, to opt out of systems that do not lead to wellness, and to participate in his own healing and renewal.

Even though the paralytic and the other invalids at Bethesda had been taught that “the system is the solution,” on their small scale, the system (the Bethesda Pool) was a solution only for some, at the expense of all the others. By telling the paralytic to get up, pick up his mat and walk, Jesus taught him to bypass the system and to challenge it. Brueggemann writes, “The goal of the managers and benefactors is to stabilize the system so that it is not noticed that it is a system, but there is only reality.” Jesus taught the paralytic that indeed there is life outside the system.

We could use some holy imagination in our own lives. The Bethesda story reminds us of the fact that social and economic systems meant to assist the needy often keep them in poverty.

In May of 2018, the United Nations released a report on the state of poverty in the United States harshly criticizing current policies. It said: “For almost five decades the overall policy response has been neglectful at best,” the report states, “but the policies pursued over the past year seem deliberately designed to remove basic protections from the poorest, punish those who are not in employment and make even basic health care into a privilege to be earned rather than a right of citizenship.”

That UN report stated that 40 million Americans live in poverty, that 18.5 million live in extreme poverty, and that 5.3 million Americans live in “Third World conditions of absolute poverty,”

Chris Campbell in his book *The Word Before the Powers*, wonders that if one of the ways the Principalities and Powers, the Systems of Domination, keep us under their thumb is by keeping us busy, tired, and diverted. We become numbed to the call of Jesus Christ to serve God and serve the hurting because we don't have time. We come home after work and collapse in front of the TV until it is time to go to bed and repeat the process all over again. Weekends are when we want to get out of town or do something else. So we live life to the minimum. And we say we want change when we actually want to remain the same – but we want to feel better about it.

Could he be on to something?

We know that to get up and follow Jesus will involve us in people's lives in ways we're not sure we want, because to be whole means to be re-membered, re-connected with God and with God's people and God's creation. No more isolation. No more living my own private life where no one bothers me. To be whole means to get off the couch and get involved. It means to work fervently, often doing behind the scenes work that is tedious and overlooked.

Gregory Jones, former Dean at Duke Divinity School, said: “Holy friendships are those most likely to help us change, they challenge the sins we've come to love, affirm the gifts we're afraid to claim, dream dreams we otherwise wouldn't have dreamed.”

We are made well in community, among holy friends, who help us when we haven't the foggiest notion of what well looks like anymore. We are made well in community, among holy friends, who dream dreams – helping us break free of the false realities of oppressive systems. We are made well in community, among holy friends, who help us not only imagine God's desire of wellness -of life, and life abundant – but who help us participate our way into the coming of that true reality.

“Do you want to be made well?” The holy friend asked the man who had been alone for 38 years with no one to help him. And when the man began making excuses as to why he had not been healed, Jesus refused listen to such apologies. He told him to stand.

May we too be made well by the healing power of Jesus. Amen.

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