



United Methodist Church OF GENEVA

Do you you want to be made well?

An Eastertide sermon by Pastor Rob Hamilton

Delivered on May 22, 2022 on John 5:19a - The Message

1-6 Soon another Feast came around and Jesus was back in Jerusalem. Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem there was a pool, in Hebrew called *Bethesda*, with five alcoves. Hundreds of sick people—blind, crippled, paralyzed—were in these alcoves. One man had been an invalid there for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him stretched out by the pool and knew how long he had been there, he said, “Do you want to get well?” **7** The sick man said, “Sir, when the water is stirred, I don’t have anybody to put me in the pool. By the time I get there, somebody else is already in.” **8-9** Jesus said, “Get up, take your bedroll, start walking.” The man was healed on the spot. He picked up his bedroll and walked off.

Prayer of Illumination

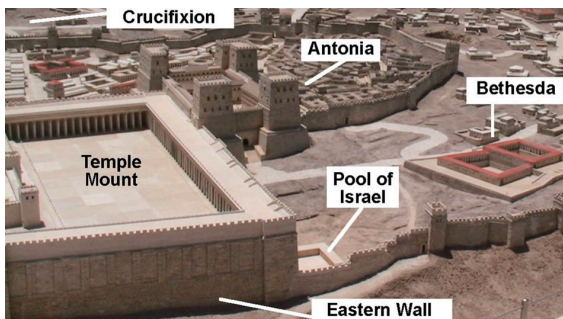
Jesus,

We’d be hesitant to admit that we would need anything from you. Our affluence tends to lull us into self-sufficiency. But if we are honest we don’t have it all together, we are not really in control, and we have plenty of baggage. Turns out we may not be that different than those we read about in Scripture. By your Spirit, help us to see where we might need your healing touch and give us the courage to heed you word to stand and walk. Amen.

Sermon

So this is an interesting story.

John’s gospel often tells stories with multiple layers of meaning. allow me to peel through some layers here. Like when we read this story in the context of the larger chapter five, this story seems to be about whether or not Jesus is legit because he healed on the sabbath and the healed person carried his bedroll... I think John enjoys telling stories of how the religious establishment misses the forest for the trees. Like would God really be upset that God’s own son, Jesus, healed someone on the sabbath? But that’s just one layer that we don’t need to get into today.



There is this other layer about seemingly magical healing waters. It turns out that’s a thing. We know where the pool from John’s gospel is located today with it’s five porticos or alcoves. There are accounts outside of the New Testament that when that pool would turn into a jacuzzi, the first person who got in the stirred

waters would experience some type of healing. I don't know what to make of such accounts, but there is a reputation for this holy site in Bethesda and there are other such reputed healing pools located around the world¹. Another layer for another day.

Then there is the personal layer to this story that has ripples into broader life in community. John tells this story with just enough detail in the personal layer to give us some plot but leaving enough of the details vague so that we can start to see ourselves in the story. Here is what I mean:

A festival is happening. Which festival? We're not sure, but it doesn't really matter. What matters is that people have gathered for celebration, community, covenant worship of their God who has a history of delivering people from that which holds them back.

Jesus is going up to Jerusalem for this festival and he purposely heads to a place where hundreds of ailing persons either reside, or spend their days hoping for a chance at healing, or perhaps gathered at this pool are people who have come to the festival and could benefit from this pool's healing reputation. But there is a catch, right? We already heard the catch. It's only one person that gets healed and its only when the waters stir. This pool is not like Old Faithful and its stirring is predictable. So for someone to find healing in Bethesda's waters can be a long-shot but plausible. There is nothing random reinforcement to give us hope, right?



Now Jesus happens to see a man whose specific ailment is unclear. John tells us there are people gathered there with vision and hearing impairments, mobility issues and paralysis. But the man in Jesus' focus, he's just sick, or invalid or infirm. That's an interesting detail to leave out, given all the other

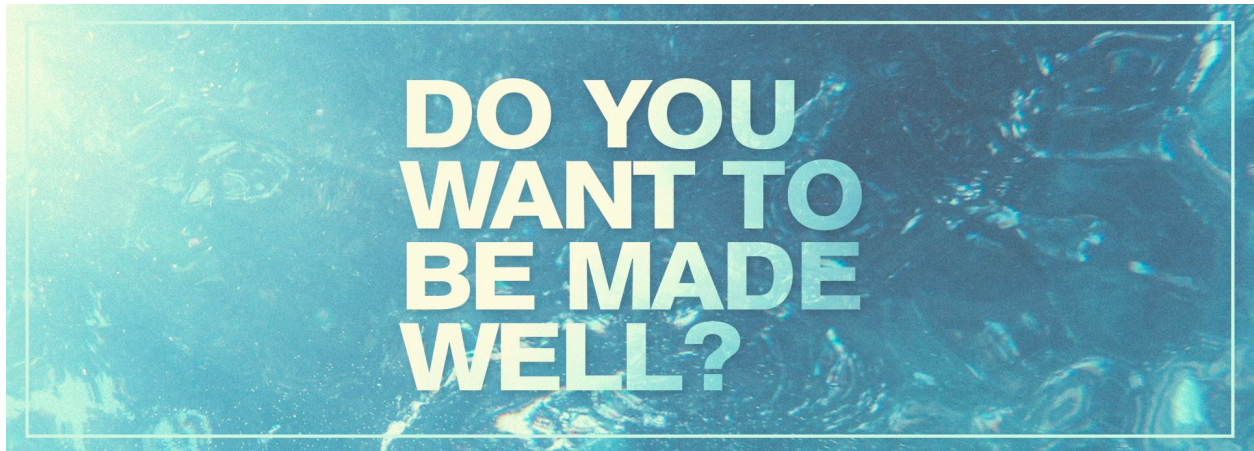
details in the telling of this story. It is like John is inviting us to picture whatever or whoever needs healing for our own lives, maybe even ourselves by leaving this man's ailment out of the story.

This omission of specificity is especially interesting because we know exactly how many years this man has been poolside and infirm - 38 years! That's right. 38 years! That's a long time to live infirm. That's a long time to not have anyone in your life to help you get the one thing you need to be made well, a helping hand to the pool. 38 years is the same number of years the Israelites were wandering aim-

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/better-living/travel/7-of-the-worlds-amazing-healing-waters>

lessly in the desert before coming to the edge of the promised land, that's an interesting detail to sneak in this story, like maybe this healing we are about to see is not just a personal healing, but a healing of nations - perhaps a clue to another layer in this story?

Jesus sees the man and he knows he's been there all these years (we're not sure how Jesus knows, maybe Jesus has seen him there before, when he was 12 and roaming the temple without his parents) and Jesus asks the man "Do you want to be made well?" In my head, Jesus' question comes out as compassionate and incredulous at the same time.



In response, the sick man turns to the same story he's been telling himself for so long, its not even an excuse anymore. In essence he has come to believe: "I can't be made well, no one will help me." That's the story he's been telling about himself, a story that began as a real concern of not having help, until one day he stopped asking for help. And then one day he didn't think he was worthy of help, that he was un-help-able.

Does that happen to us? I can't lose the weight. I'm not an adventurous person. No one could love me. What limitations have we faced that started out legitimate, then became an excuse, but with enough time have become our identity or the narrative we've learned to tell about ourselves. And so we're just sprawled out and stuck, existing not really living.

This isn't just us, right? This could be our church, too, right? We might have faced some adversity or failure in the past and so there was a legitimate reason to not do something that we knew we needed to do, but then we never addressed it so now its gone from an excuse to the very story we tell about ourselves. And so we're just sprawled out and stuck, existing not really living.

Same could be said of our nation, I suppose? Vietnam was bad for many reasons. A lot of hurt was caused, that hurt never healed, the abuses of power were never remedied and were still just as divided as we were then: baby killers vs the

hippies vs the patriots. It just gets worse and worse and so as a nation we are sprawled out and stuck, existing not really living.

From this angle, it can all be pretty depressing with hope for healing a long-shot at best.

Is that when Jesus comes on the scene, sees us - in all the various forms of us in our concentric connected relationships- and asks with compassion, curiosity and some incredulousness: do you want to be made well? Do we really want to get better or are we content to keeping living out our days just eking by with feeble excuses that someone else didn't make it happen for us? Let's sit with that question for a lingering moment...

In John's gospel, notice how Jesus didn't wait for a response. Notice Jesus didn't determine how bad the guy wanted healing or needed healing? Jesus didn't determine if the guy was deserving of healing. He didn't say - good grief man its been 38 years, I guess you made your bed, now lie in it. No, with a word Jesus launches the sick man onto a much harder, but more rewarding and satisfying way of life. And notice Jesus doesn't say you're healed, he just says "Rise! Take up your bed and walk." - kind like today's the day, no more excuses; get to it!

Later the man is harassed for carrying his stuff on the Sabbath and eventually the man and Jesus meet up and Jesus warns him not to fall into that old story about himself anymore and to take hold of this new lease on life. And we don't know what happens next in the man's life because Jesus goes toe to toe with the religious establishment on a whole other layer in the story, which can be fodder for another sermon or study another day. But it leaves me thinking: "Is Jesus speaking to us?" Does Jesus look upon us, our church, and our nation and asks with compassion, curiosity and some incredulousness: do you want to be made well? Do we really want to get better or are we content to keeping living out our days just eking by with feeble excuses that someone else didn't make it happen for us?

What if it's up for us to decide? What if the healing is already here? What if the command as simple as "is if you want to be made well then get up and be well." What if the choice is ours, individually and collectively? I mean this more allegorically than literally, right.

While I won't rule out God's ability to restore sight, hearing, speech, or movement, that may not happen to those listening to this message today. But we can all shed that narrative of what his holding us back from really living life or taking the risk to live a harder but more rewarding life that comes in following Jesus. This can be true of our church and nation too. We have existential problems that threaten us all, we can address them if we are willing to accept Jesus command to get up and do something about it instead of sitting in our excuses and broken narratives.

But the purpose of Jesus healing isn't just a healing for our sake, there is always something more to Jesus' healing. We aren't healed just so we feel better, or our church doesn't die or the American experiment doesn't fail. We are healed FOR something! I think one other layer this healing miracle in John is so that healing can come through the healed and into the world.

Jesus could have said anything to heal that man, but he chose to tell him to get up and carry his belongings (which Jesus knew was a violation of sabbath) and walk. This specific instruction had the purpose of stirring up a larger issue of justice and righteousness.

I'm not sure what Jesus is stirring up in us, or in our church, or in our nation? I don't think we need to know the details right now. All Jesus is asking us is if we want to be made well, then we just need to take that first step and move. So, Jesus asks us: do we want to be made well? I guess we'll only be able to know the answer if we take the risk of rising out of the broken stories we tell about ourselves and start moving again, start living again. And if we keep reading we know that Jesus takes care of the rest, we just have to take that first uncertain, pained, awkward step into the healing Jesus offer you, me, our church, our nation and our world. Amen.