

May 9, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

John 5:1-9 Catch Your Breath in Times of Suffering
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

John 5:1-9

New Revised Standard Version

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

Jesus asks these questions that are really in-your-face. “Do you love me? (John 21:15)” “Why are you so afraid? (Mark 4:40)” “Are you also going to leave? (John 6:67)” “How long shall I put up with you? (Mark 9:19)” “Do you still not understand? (Mark 8:21)”¹ Today we get possibly the most jarring question of all. Jesus is in Jerusalem, near a pool by the Sheep’s Gate. In the five doorways by the pool, the chronically sick and disabled of the city wait. This is Jerusalem’s equivalent of a hopelessly overcrowded city hospital. It is a place where no one has power, with people lying around waiting for a miracle, hoping for wholeness and new life. Legend says that an angel visits this pool at Bethzatha at random times, stirring up the water, and giving it healing properties. The first person to step into the pool after the angel disturbs the water, will receive healing.

This pool attracted people who had tried everything. They were at the end of their rope and the end of their hope. Jesus visits, finds a man who has been sick for thirty-eight years, lying by the pool. Jesus approaches him and asks a question. No introductions, no small talk, no sermon, only a question. “Do you want to be made well?” We don’t know why Jesus approached this man, but he has been sick for thirty-eight years, longer than the average male life expectancy at the time. This man has been sick literally for a lifetime. “Do you want to be made well?”

Thirty-eight years and this man was still showing up. Yes, he is showing up for a legend, for a superstition, but he hasn’t given up on getting better. He is still showing up. He hasn’t quit. He hasn’t stopped living. This man believes his condition doesn’t have the last word. After thirty-eight years, this man has hope that he can get better.

He is still showing up, after all that he has been through, he is still showing up. No matter what you are going through, it is too soon to quit. Dr. Seuss’ first book was rejected by twenty-three publishers, but when he didn’t quit it sold six million copies. In its first year of existence, Coca-Cola only sold four hundred Cokes. Henry Ford went into bankruptcy twice in three years. Michelangelo spent seven years on his back painting the Sistene Chapel. Michael Jordan got cut from his high school basketball team. In 1905, the University of Berlin rejected the doctoral dissertation of one Albert Einstein.²

“Do you want to be made well?” Jesus isn’t concerned about the amount of time wasted. Jesus only wants to know, “Do you want to be made well?” Do you want to be made whole? Is Jesus implying that the man’s sickness is partially his fault? That doesn’t sound like Jesus. Throughout the Gospels Jesus has compassion for the sick and the disabled. Jesus doesn’t ever blame the victim or respond to pain or illness with contempt or mockery. At every

¹ Thanks to Debie Thomas for the idea of starting the sermon with these questions of Jesus. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2225-the-question-that-hurts>

² Thanks to Derik Jones for these examples: <https://asermonforeversunday.com/sermons/c23-the-sixth-sunday-of-easter-year-c/>

opportunity Jesus corrects the cultural misunderstanding about disease and disability being someone's fault.

I wonder if the man's identity was wrapped up in his infirmity, in his weakness, in his defeat. Could he imagine life without his illness? When Jesus looked at the man did he only see resignation? Someone who couldn't imagine what he wanted for his body, his soul, his future because he was so beaten down? The man doesn't say that he wants to be healed. The man explains the unfairness of the world. The man isn't able to voice what he wants.

Then, Jesus invites the man to see the impossible and to participate in his own healing and renewal. Jesus says to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Pick up the reminder of your sickness and walk. It is a symbol of what could have killed you, but didn't.

There was this system that people believed was the solution. Sit by the pool, wait your turn, and you will be healed. Jesus comes and tells the man to get up, to pick up his mat and walk. Jesus doesn't take him to the pool to be healed. Jesus tells him to bypass the system and to challenge it. There is life outside the system. We have to challenge the systems that exist and we have to look for help outside of established systems. We have this American dream that if someone works long and hard enough, they will make it because anyone can pull themselves out up by their bootstraps. But, we know that isn't true. The system itself is rigged.

Today is Mother's Day. I have so much respect for my mom. When I was two years old, my mom found herself newly divorced, with a two-year-old and a six-year-old. My mom had never written a check, but many of you might not have written a check either! My mom had never figured out her own taxes, she was still in school getting her Ph.D. My mom didn't want to get divorced. She didn't want anything to change. Growing up my mom taught me about resilience. She taught me about working hard and never giving up. She taught me what a mom who works outside of the home looks like, with grace, with compassion, and with love. She taught me about generosity. Every Christmas we gave Angel tree gifts to the families at church. We went to church because that's what you did. She took us to all of our dance and piano lessons, even after my piano teacher told her that she was wasting her money because I had no talent.

Do you want to be made well from all that paralyzes and diminishes you? Do you want to stand up, take up your mat, and walk? Don't cling to your pain because it is familiar. Don't decide that you are doomed to sit at the very edge of healing for the rest of your life, and never attain it. Have you heard of the Sankofa bird? The Sankofa bird is a mythical bird from the Akan tribe in Ghana. It looks like an ostrich with its feet going forward and its head turned backwards. It runs forward but always looks back. The Akan believe what we learn from the past ensures a strong future.

God cares about what you want. God wants to know your desires and for you to recognize and articulate them. God wants you to be made well. God wants you to thrive again, to live again. God wants to deliver you from the paralysis of your past, of your fear, and of your baggage. God wants you to say yes, I want to be made whole. "At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk."

God is always and everywhere in the business of making new. That's who God is, it doesn't depend on us or on having enough faith. Jesus never stops asking us, "Do you want to be made well?" because Jesus wants us to thrive. Jesus heals because that is what Jesus does. Jesus wants us to be free and to be whole. You are healed not because you earned it, fixed it yourself, or even deserve it. You are healed because God loves us all *that* much. So get up, take your mat, and walk. Thanks be to God, Amen.