Scripture Reading 1: John 5:1-18 adapted

Later, Jesus went to Jerusalem for another Jewish festival. In the city near the sheep gate was a pool with five porches; in Hebrew it is called Bethzatha. Many sick people were lying on the porches beside the pool. Some were blind, some were crippled, and some were paralyzed. They were waiting for the water to move, because every now and then an angel of the Lord went down into the pool and stirred up the water. The first sick person to go into the pool after the water was stirred up was healed from whatever disease he had. Beside the pool was a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw the man and realized that he had been crippled for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” The sick man answered Jesus, “Sir, I don’t have anyone here to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up. While I’m trying to get there, someone else always gets in before me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Get up, pick up your cot, and walk.” Instantly, the man was healed! He picked up his cot and started walking around. The day this miracle happened was a Sabbath day.

When the Jewish leaders saw the man carrying his cot, they said to him, “This is the Sabbath! No one is allowed to carry a cot on the Sabbath.” But he answered, “The man who made me well told me, ‘Pick up your cot and walk.’” Then the Jews asked him, “Who is the man who told you to pick up your cot and walk?” But the man who had been healed did not know who Jesus was, for there was a crowd in that place, and Jesus had slipped away. Later, Jesus found the man at the Temple and said to him, “See, you are well now. Stop sinning so that something worse doesn’t happen to you.” Then the man went and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him.

So the Jewish leaders began harassing (‘making a lot of trouble’ or persecuting) Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules. But Jesus answered them, “My Father never stops working, and so I keep working, too.” His reply made the Jews more intent on killing him. Not only did he break the laws about the day of worship, but also he made himself equal to God when he said repeatedly that God was his Father.

Introduction

[ Pastor Joyce introduction with object lesson about inability to walk ]

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2 Bethzatha; some manuscripts have “Bethesda” and others have “Bethsaida.”
For anyone who has had training as a counsellor, there is a counselling technique called "Solution-Focused Therapy". When faced with a particular situation, one of the main questions that the counsellor will ask with this technique is, "What are you going to do?" (Caley, 2003)

Usually, the answer is such where the person in conflict is looking for someone to get rid of the problem - "I need someone to do something for me!" And the ‘someone’ will come from a long list of possible responders, such as: my wife or husband,
my kids (or conversely – my parents),
my friend(s),
my employer,
my teacher(s),
my pastor,
my church,
God.

Solutions to my problem has to be the responsibility of anyone . . . but me.

I believe that this is a very typical human response. It is far easier to look for a rescuer than to take responsibility for myself. “Solution-focused counselling” reminds people of their own role as a participant in their lives. They are not to be an innocent bystander as life goes by as they experience hurt, rejection, disappointment – but continue to make themselves unable to do anything about it. It focuses attention on individual responsibility.

This isn’t really a new counselling technique; in fact it’s one that Jesus used quite often in His conversations with people. "What are you going to do?"

This morning, we are looking at a brief Sabbath encounter between Jesus and a man with a very special and difficult need. And, in doing so, I would like us to consider the possibility that Jesus may be speaking the same message to you and me and the church today that He did to the man at the Pool of Bethesda.

Come with me for a moment to this pool of Bethesda. Here is a place where sick people congregate because they believe that they can be healed by being the first to get into the water whenever it is stirred.

Biblical historians tell us: "The pool was such that it was deep enough to swim in . . . Beneath the pool there was a subterranean stream, and every now and again the stream bubbled up and disturbed the waters of the pool; and the belief was that the disturbance was caused by an angel, and that the first person to get into the pool after the angel had troubled it would be healed from any illness from which he might be suffering.” (Barclay, 1955, (8th Impression1965), p. 173)

And then, “. . . there’s Jesus!”

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3 Material taken and adapted from a sermon “Do You Want To?” (Part 5 in a series "Conversations with Jesus") by Pastor Guy Caley, Lebanon First Assembly of God, Lebanon, Missouri.
When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem on this occasion, he seems to be alone. He finds his way to this famous pool. It may be that Jesus walked around for a bit – watching, listening.

In this way, Jesus approaches a man who is obviously crippled – for 38 years. All around this man are the bits and pieces common to cripples who begged for a living in those days – a mat or cot on which to lie, a plate or bowl to collect the alms of those who might take pity upon him. And it is obvious to anyone looking at this man that:

“. . . his disability made it very unlikely, even impossible, that he would ever be the first to get into the pool after it had been troubled. He had no one to help him in.” (Barclay, 1955, (8th Impression1965), p. 174)

So Jesus asks this man a rather crazy, “Solution-Focused Therapy” question: “Do you want to get well?”

What kind of a question is that, really?
Does a crippled man want to get well?
That's a question that rivals one of my Mom’s or Dad’s all-time favourites when I was growing up: "Do you want a spanking?"
"Well now – just give me a minute, I'll have to think about that one!"
The answer to the question seems obvious.

Maybe hope had died.
Maybe, all that was left was a dull and lifeless despair.

“But maybe, just maybe, the question isn’t as shallow as it seems at first glance. Let’s just consider that for a moment. Here is a man who had been crippled for 38 years. In all of that time he has relied upon the kindness of others to make his way in life. If he were to ‘get well’ he would have to earn his own way for the first time in 38 years – perhaps the first time ever. He would no longer have an excuse for what his life was. The responsibility would be his.” (Caley, 2003)

Maybe the question isn’t such a crazy question after all.
Maybe it was a question that targeted the very center of this man’s heart.
Maybe it was a question that exposed the personal, underlying, secret motives that lay deep within.

And what about you and me?
As Jesus looks at the crippling situations we find ourselves involved: crippled by problems, crippled by circumstances, crippled by attitudes, crippled by behaviours, crippled by . . . sin, what does Jesus ask us?
Could it be that he asks us the same question that he asked this cripple at the pool, “Do you want to get well?”

Do you really want Jesus to heal the parts of your life where you have been damaged or is it just plain easier to hold on to the hurt?
Is it easier to let bitterness fester deep inside?
Is it easier to wallow in the hurt and betrayal you are feeling right now?
Is it easier to hide in a corner, licking . . . and liking our wounds?
“All too often we hold on tightly to the things that paralyze us spiritually. Jesus can heal us of those things, but when he does we will be left without excuse for our lives and the choices we make. We will no longer be able to cry, ‘My life isn’t my fault, others are to blame!’” (Caley, 2003)

So the question isn’t crazy at all – then . . . or now.
"Do you want to get well?"
To the one crippled by past hurts, Jesus asks, "Do you want to be healed?"
To the one chained by secret sin, Jesus asks, "Do you want to be cut loose?"
To the one battling addiction, Jesus asks, "Do you want to be saved?"
To all of us who need His healing touch in any part of our life, Jesus asks "Do you want to get well?"
To receive the healing He has for us we must desire to be changed.
We must answer, "Yes, Lord, I am ready to put the past behind me."

Notice the man does not answer “Yes” or “No” to the question Jesus asks. He kinda’ evades the question.

“Sir, I don't have anyone here to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up. While I'm trying to get there, someone else always gets in before me.”
(John 5:7 adapted)
"I've been here for 38 years, but . . . “

"Do you want to get well?"
"The doctor says I can, but . . ."
"I hate the way things are, but . . ."
"I should go back to school, but . . ."
"I need to get my life back on track, but . . ."
The man did not answer Jesus’ question at all, but offered an excuse for why he hadn’t been healed yet: "I'm all alone, there is no one to help me"

We can really sympathize with this man lying here by the pool. He seems so alone in this world. It seems that his family might have deserted him, crippled and lonely.

"No one is there to help me!"
It really is a tragic cry. But it's still does not answer the question, "Do you want to get well?"
It still amounts to an excuse. To say "There is no one here to help me" also means, "I can't help myself and God is not doing anything for me either."


_I have everything I need for joy!" Robert Reed said._

"Amazing!" I thought.

_His hands are twisted and his feet are useless. He can't bathe himself. He can't feed himself. He can't brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. His shirts are held together by strips of Velcro. His speech drags like a wornout audio cassette._
Robert has cerebral palsy.

The disease keeps him from driving a car, riding a bike, and going for a walk. But it didn’t keep him from graduating from high school or attending Abilene Christian University, from which he graduated with a degree in Latin. Having cerebral palsy didn’t keep him from teaching at a St. Louis junior college or from venturing overseas on five mission trips.

And Robert’s disease didn’t prevent him from becoming a missionary in Portugal.

He moved to Lisbon, alone, in 1972. There he rented a hotel room and began studying Portuguese. He found a restaurant owner who would feed him after the rush hour and a tutor who would instruct him in the language.

Then he stationed himself daily in a park, where he distributed brochures about Christ. Within six years he led seventy people to the Lord, one of whom became his wife, Rosa.

I heard Robert speak recently. I watched other men carry him in his wheelchair onto the platform. I watched them lay a Bible in his lap. I watched his stiff fingers force open the pages. And I watched people in the audience wipe away tears of admiration from their faces. Robert could have asked for sympathy or pity, but he did just the opposite. He held his bent hand up in the air and boasted, “I have everything I need for joy.”

His shirts are held together by Velcro, but his life is held together by joy.

So, what about us today? When Jesus asks, "Do you want to get well," what is our response? When Jesus asks, "Do you want to be healed from your past hurts?" do we reply, "You don’t know how bad so-and-so hurt me!" When Jesus asks “Do you want to be cut loose from the chains of your secret sin?” do we counter, "I just can’t control myself!" When Jesus questions the addict, "Do you want to be set free from your addiction?" is the answer, "I have an addiction and it’s a disease and it’s not my fault!" When Jesus asks, "Do you want to be saved?" will you excuse yourself by saying, "I’m not nearly as bad as other people I know!"

Jesus said to the cripple "Do you want to get well?" And he replied, "No one is there to help me."

To receive the healing Jesus has for our lives we must put away our excuses. “The first essential towards receiving the power of Jesus is the intense desire for it. Jesus comes to us and says: ‘Do you really want to be changed?’ If in our inmost hearts we are well content to stay as we are there can be no change for us. The desire for the better things must be surging in our hearts.” (Barclay, 1955, (8th Impression1965), p. 175)

Jesus ignored the excuse and went on to tell the man to get up.

“Get up, pick up your cot, and walk.” (John 5:8 adapted)

“It is as if Jesus said to the man, ‘Man, bend your will to it! Make a supreme effort and you and I will do this thing together!’” (Barclay, 1955, (8th Impression1965), p. 175)
William Barclay goes on to say, “The power of God never [happens without] the effort of [humans]. No [one] can sit back and relax and expect a miracle. Nothing is truer than that we must realize our own helplessness; but in a very real sense it is true that a miracle happens when our will and God’s power cooperate to make it possible.” (Barclay, 1955, (8th Impression1965), p. 175)

What was Jesus doing? He was commanding the man to do the impossible!

“Get up, pick up your cot, and walk.” (John 5:8 adapted)

“The man might well have said with a kind of injured resentment that that was the one thing he could not do. . . [He] might well have said that for thirty-eight years his bed had been carrying him and that there was not much sense in telling him to carry his bed. But again the man made the effort along with Christ – and the thing was done.” (Barclay, 1955, (8th Impression1965), p. 175)

Jesus does not make his approach with a maudlin sympathy that accepts excuses and extends a pitiful, “Ah-h-h-h, poor you.” What Jesus does do is come with a message of hope and vitality. He says to us as he said to that cripple by the pool, "Get up and walk."

“Here is the road to achievement. There are so many things in this world which beat us and defeat us and conquer us. When there is in us intensity of desire, when there is in us the determination to make the effort, although it may seem hopeless, then the power of Christ gets its opportunity, and with Christ we conquer that which for so long has conquered us.” (Barclay, 1955, (8th Impression1965), p. 176)

The man complained, "No one is there to help me."

But in Jesus, we really do have somebody, and not just someone to drag us around on our cots or mats of self-pity but someone who can bring life to our own withered limbs, who can bring healing to our own damaged emotions, who can bring strength to our own resolve . . . someone who can say with all authority, “Get up, pick up your cot . . . your life . . . and walk.” (John 5:8 adapted)

Please understand this: I am not preaching a self-help gospel.

His power brings 100% of the healing.

It is all of Christ, all about God’s grace, all about his love, all about his mercy.

But there is a huge amount of human responsibility here. Think about it for a moment.

Who did the healing? Jesus.

Who had to get up and walk? The man.

Who saves us from our sinfulness? Jesus.

Who must repent and believe? We must.

Who sanctifies us and gives us the power to live above sin? Jesus.

Who must decide day by day to follow Him and do what is right?
We must.

“There has been far too much misunderstanding on this point in the church and as a result there have been far too many excuses. I’m not saying we are the masters of our own destiny or that we have the power in and of ourselves, but the Bible says that we’ve been made more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For us to act as if we are defeated is to deny the truth of God’s word and call Him a liar.” (Caley, 2003)

Jesus came and died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. The blood he shed cleanses us from sin and frees us of sin’s bondage. The fact that he rose from the dead demonstrates his victory over Satan’s oppression. Now we are able to be partakers of that victory if we will reach out to him in faith. He still calls to us, "Get up . . . and walk."

It would have been easy for the man at the pool to laugh off Jesus and dismiss him as a nut. But it takes more strength and courage to obey his impossible instruction and leave the hurt behind,
walk above the level of our sins,
accept the salvation He offers.

God’s work in our lives is accomplished by his grace alone, but to experience it we must reach out in faith and cooperate with him in the process of repentance – living life in a new way.

Jesus’ question echoes down through the ages to us today, "Do you want to get well?" Today, Jesus waits for your response. Will you continue to hold on to the things that hold you back? Will you offer the same old excuses? Or will you listen to the instruction of Jesus and reach for that which is beyond yourself? Will you "Get up . . . and walk"?

I’m going to ask each one who feels that the Lord is dealing with them to come forward to pray. We will pray with you. Perhaps you want to come and give your life to the Lord for the first time. Others may want to rededicate their lives to Him. Maybe you have been struggling in a particular area of your life and you’re ready to get it right today. I want all of you to come right now.

AMEN

Bibliography


