

This summer, I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled “Meeting Jesus,” where I am looking through the gospel of John at the interactions of various people with Jesus, in order to discover who Jesus is and what it means to know and follow Him. This Sunday, we will be in John 5, looking at the interaction between Jesus and a disabled man.

John 5:1-18 - *Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie-- the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁴ ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, **"Do you want to get well?"** ⁷ "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."*

Let me pause and explain v. 7. There was a legend in those days, which you read in v. 4 of the King James Version: “*For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.*”

This man has apparently been disabled for 38 years, being brought to the pool, hoping to be healed. And today is the day when everything changes for him:

*⁸ Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat." ¹¹ But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'" ¹² So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to **pick it up and walk?**" ¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. ¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, **"See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."** ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. ¹⁶ So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews **persecuted him.** Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." ¹⁸ For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*

So, to summarize: Jesus comes to the pool at Bethesda and heals this man who has been disabled for 38 years. He tells the man to pick up his mat and walk, which gets him into trouble with the religious leaders, who had set up laws about what you could carry on the Sabbath, since it was meant to be a day of rest, where no work would be done. We read at the end of this passage that the religious leaders wanted to kill Jesus, not only for breaking the Sabbath, but more importantly for making himself equal to God. **This morning, I want to make one observation about healing, and then look closer at v. 6, where Jesus asks “do you want to get well?”**

I want you to notice that although there are many disabled people at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus does not heal every person there. He is only recorded as healing one man. Not only that, but it doesn't even appear that he healed a very worthy candidate. Notice that in v. 11, when the religious leaders accuse him of working on the sabbath, he tells them it was the fault of the guy who healed him. In fact, the disabled man apparently didn't even bother to get Jesus' name. And then, when Jesus finds him again in v. 14, the man immediately goes to the religious leaders to tell them that it was Jesus who healed them, getting him in trouble. The point is that Jesus does not heal everyone, and even the person he heals does not seem to be very deserving.

You may find it confusing why Jesus would not just heal everyone, or why God does not answer every prayer for healing. Today, just as in Jesus' day, some people are healed, while others get sick and die. Some pray to God and experience supernatural healing. Some pray and only get worse. And there doesn't always appear to be a formula that we can follow – the most faithful believer may do everything right and die, while another person, who barely prays, is healed. But when you read v. 14, you do get some very important perspective on healing:

John 5:14 - Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, *"See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."*

According to Jesus, being disabled for 38 years, as terrible as that is, is not the worst thing that could happen to this man. Being healed of his disability is NOT the thing he needs the most. Evidently, there is something far worse that could happen to him if he does not stop sinning. Consider a similar account in Mark 1:32-38:

Mark 1:32-38 - That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. ³³ The whole town gathered at the door, ³⁴ and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he

would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was. ³⁵ Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, **where he prayed.** ³⁶ Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷ and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" ³⁸ Jesus replied, "**Let us go** somewhere else-- **to** the nearby villages-- so I can preach there also. That is why I have come."

In this passage, the whole town came out looking for healing, and Jesus replied to his disciples by saying that they needed to go somewhere else, so that he could preach there, **for that is why he came.** Jesus is telling them that his primary purpose is not the healing of the body, which can only preserve life for a few more years before eventually dying, but the healing of the soul, which could overcome death and give a person eternal life. Hear me clearly: God's priority for your life is not your physical healing, but deliverance from sin. It is salvation from death. That is the primary reason why Jesus came. In fact, we looked at this passage two weeks ago:

John 3:16-18 - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

God's priority for your life is that you would be saved from your sin and from death and hell and have eternal life. That is why Jesus came. Now here's the important thing: **sometimes saving your soul means NOT healing you physically.** Sometimes, that means allowing pain and suffering. Sometimes in order to save your soul, God needs to allow terrible things to happen to you, in order to break your self-reliance and wake you up for your need for God, your need for a Savior. I know that in my life, it was suffering that woke me up to my need for God, and I would guess that the same is true for many of you.

One of the best talks I ever heard on this subject was by a quadriplegic Christian woman by the name of Joni Eareckson Tada. In that talk, she put it this way: "**The same God who healed blind eyes and withered hands also said gouge out your eye, and cut off your hand, if it leads you into sin.**" In other words, physical healing is important, but it is better to be blind and have no hands and go to heaven than to be physically whole and end up in Hell. Your soul is a much bigger deal to God, and for that reason, He does not heal everyone. And that is why we read in v. 14:

John 5:14 - *Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."*

Not all are physically healed, because physical healing is not primarily what God is after in your life. He wants to save your soul and to rid your life of the sin that can kill your soul.

Back to verse 6. *When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"*

The man's answer reveals that he wants to, but he can't get in the water fast enough: ⁷ *"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."*

At first glance it may seem like an odd question for Jesus to ask – “do you want to get well?” No, Jesus, I'm just laying here disabled for the fun of it, because misery loves the company of other miserable people. But I really think that question is more profound than it may seem at first glance. After all, this man has been an invalid for 38 years. He has been hanging out at this pool near the temple, receiving alms for the poor. He has probably grown pretty accustomed to this lifestyle. And maybe, just maybe, he really doesn't want Jesus to come and change his circumstances.

I want you to hear and consider this question this morning. Do you want to get well? And when I ask that question, I don't just mean physically, but in other areas of your life and discipleship. Because I believe that Jesus has the power to heal, to give life to the fullest, not just physically, but emotionally, psychologically, relationally, and every other way. Let me be clear: I'm not talking about some man-centered, name-it and claim it, health and wealth, prosperity gospel nonsense, where God is some heavenly ATM and if you know the code, you can get him to dispense healing for every one of your diseases and injuries. As I said earlier, God does NOT heal every disease, because His primary goal is the salvation of your soul. No, I'm talking about what Jesus said in **John 10:10** - *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* Jesus came to give us life to the fullest. To give us a spring of water inside of us welling up to eternal life. To lead us out of sin and slavery and into a life of joy and purpose and love and shalom, wholeness. And this morning he is asking you,

“do you want to get well?” There is so much life that is yours if you would only say yes. But do you REALLY want to get well? Consider some possible areas:

You want to be physically healthy. But becoming physically healthy will involve a sacrifice in what you eat, or a sacrifice of time in exercise. Maybe you need to change your diet, and say no to things that you really love, or stop turning to junk food when you are anxious or depressed and turn to God instead. So while you may say that you want to be physically healthy, do you REALLY want to get well? Or do you prefer to stay out-of-shape, or unhealthy?

Or maybe you want more relational health in your life. You want to have a closer relationship to someone in your life – spouse, child, parent, sibling, friend. But building that kind of intimacy is going to involve some uncomfortable things. You may have to forgive something that they have done to you, or confront them about something that they are doing. You may need to invest in counseling, or in spending more quality time with that person. You may have to ask some hard questions, or reveal some intimate and sensitive details about your life, or have an honest, heart-to-heart conversation with them. And maybe that scares you. So, while you say that you want relational health, do you REALLY want that? Or would you prefer to keep people at a safe distance and keep things the way they are?

Maybe you have an addiction or two in your life that is really hurting you. You struggle with drinking, or eating too much, or pornography, or overspending. Whatever it is, you have found something to which you are turning to escape from the pain or boredom of the world, and it has become unhealthy and destructive in your life. But it has you enslaved, and you can't seem to escape the addiction. You know that God offers you healing, freedom from the addiction, and you say that you want to be clean, want to be pure. But do you REALLY want to be healed? Or would you prefer to stay in your addiction, prefer to keep that escape from the pain instead of giving it up?

Maybe you just have some personal issues that keep getting in the way of living life to the fullest. You know that you have patterns of thought or behaviors that are hurting yourself and others that you love. You have unhealthy fears of failure, or rejection, or intimacy, or something else. You have pain from your past that keeps you from becoming the person that you want to be, and you know that you probably need to talk that through with somebody and work towards healing. You have a terrible temper, or unhealthy obsessions, that get in the way of healthy living. But do you REALLY want to be healed? Even if it means revisiting painful

things from the past? Even if it means leaving what you know and venturing out into the unknown? Or would you prefer to stay stuck in the comfortable dysfunction?

And what about your relationship with God? You know that Jesus offers you life to the fullest, a life led by the Holy Spirit, a life of purpose and wonder and meaning. But do you REALLY want that? Especially if it will involve sacrifice, leaving the comfortable, or taking up your cross and following Him?

I hope you're understanding what I'm getting at this morning. God is often asking us, **"Do you want to get well?"** Discipleship is in some sense an invitation to health, wholeness, shalom, to living as God has created us to live. And the answer is not always as simple as it sounds, particularly if there will be sacrifice involved, if healing will involve leaving what is comfortable and following God into the unknown, trusting that what is on the other side is better than what you currently know. Did the man truly want to get well, if it would mean leaving the poolside, the community he had there? If it meant getting a job and taking on responsibility?

This question makes me think of the Israelites in the desert. When God brought them out from slavery in Egypt, they were in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

Exodus 16:2-3 - In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³ The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

Again, it seems ridiculous to us as we look back on it, but is it really? The terror of the unknown, traveling through the desert after God's lead, felt worse to them than the life they had in Egypt, living as slaves. Sure, life in Egypt things might have been miserable, but at least things were predictable. The same can be true for some who have been imprisoned or institutionalized for a long time today: the predictable misery of being imprisoned can feel safer than the terror of the unknown and the weight of responsibility that comes along with freedom.

Do you want to get well? Do you REALLY want eternal life? Do you really want the life to the full that Jesus offers to you? **Or would you prefer to stay where you are, in predictable misery?** Would you prefer the predictability of being a slave in Egypt over facing the unknown of following God through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land?

To be honest, for most of us it is not a black-and-white, all-or-nothing thing. For most of us, part of us wants to be healthy, wants a better relationship, wants to be physically fit, wants to follow God, wants to grow out of our weaknesses. But part of us wants to stay sick, stay average, stay in the comfortable, and resists any kind of healing, growth, or openness to God and change.

It's like St. Augustine said: "Lord, make me chaste (sexually pure) – but not yet!"

If I can get real honest with you for a minute. I have parts inside of me that are at war with each other. One part of me wants nothing more than to give myself fully to the work God has for me. It wants to get to the end of the day and know that I lived for God. That would be bliss. But another part of me wants to do absolutely nothing. It wants to be mindless and purposeless and just spend the day doing nothing of substance. That part of me believes that a day of purposelessness would be true bliss. And these parts are at war within me. And what I have come to realize about myself over this past year is that deep down in places I am often afraid to explore, I am afraid of being a failure. I am afraid that people will realize that I am a fraud, that I am not a capable person, that I don't measure up, that I am at the core of who I am, a big fat failure. And I think that my subconscious realized somewhere along the way that **as long as I have excuses, then I will never feel like a failure**, because, after all, I could have succeeded if I didn't have to take care of this, or if this hadn't interrupted me, or if I hadn't spent my time doing this. As long as I have excuses, then I am protected from feeling like a failure. Because what would happen if there were no excuses, no obstacles? What would happen if I really could give myself fully to the work God had for me, **and I still failed**? Well, then I would have no excuse. Nothing to hide behind. My worst fears would be realized. I would be a failure, someone who is not capable, who does not measure up.

So when God comes to me and asks, "Do you really want to get well? Do you really want to be rid of the distractions and the procrastination and the obstacles and give yourself fully to the work I have for you?" If I'm honest, I'm not sure. Part of me says "Yes, Lord, heal me now!" That part of me wants nothing in life more than to live fully for God. But the other part of me is afraid, afraid that if the excuses are removed, then I will eventually be revealed for the failure that I am. And so, like a scared little child, that part of me shakes it head and says, "No, Lord, I don't want to be healed. I want to continue laying here by the pool, making excuses for why I can't get down in the water to get healed."

And so, like the father in Mark 9:24, I exclaim to Jesus *“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”*

So what do I do? What are we going to do with our divided selves?

I could just say, “tell God this morning that YES, you want to get well and he will heal you!” But it’s not that simple. If it were that simple, then you would already be experiencing physical health, relational health, personal wholeness, spiritual vitality. Willpower alone is not going to heal us. We need God to heal that part of us that does not want to be healed. What is going on there?

I believe that deep down, part of us does not trust that God is good. We don’t fully trust that life to the fullest is found in Him. We don’t really believe that he is not looking to steal from us what we love and give to us what will make us miserable. We are afraid that God will abandon us, that we will be lost, that we will be rejected, that we will fail.

So what is it that part of us needs to know? Here are three things in particular:

- 1) **God will never leave you nor forsake you, but will be your help and strength**

Hebrews 13:5-6 - *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what **you** have, because God has said, "Never will I leave **you**; never will I forsake **you**."* ⁶ *So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*

As you make the decision to leave the predictable misery of slavery in Egypt, to follow God through the wilderness, on the way to the Promised Land, know that He will be with you. He will go before you. He will protect you. He will guide you to a better place. And He will never leave you nor forsake you. Jesus will never let you go.

Isaiah 41:10 - *So **do not** fear, for I am with you; **do not be dismayed**, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*

- 2) **God is good and He loves you perfectly**

Romans 8:32 - *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

God gave you His Son, and will give you all you need. If He gave you His Son when you were His enemy, then trust that He will give you what you need when you are His beloved son or daughter. He has good plans for you. God is always working all things together for your good. He is trustworthy. And because of Jesus' death for your sins, He sees you as perfect. Even if others reject you or judge you, He has declared you not guilty, to be His beloved child in whom He is well pleased, and nothing can change that reality about who you are.

Even if the road out of slavery and through the wilderness is painful, trust that He is good and He loves you perfectly, and that He is leading you to a better place.

3) Life to the fullest is found in knowing God

John 10:10 - *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

Make no mistake. Fear is a liar, and the enemy is a master at scaring you into disobedience and into giving up. But Jesus has come to bring life to the full. And there is nothing you can give up that God won't replace with something better, whether in this life or in eternity:

Luke 18:28-30 - *Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!"²⁹ "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God³⁰ will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."*

Food, travel, companionship, nothing in this world compares to knowing and following Him.

Isaiah 55:2-3 - *Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.³ Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.*

Your heart needs to know that there is nothing you can't give up that He won't replace with something a thousand times better, with more of His presence, His love, and His power. He is worth it. Freedom from slavery is worth it. Giving yourself fully to Him is worth it. It is better to be well than to live in sickness, in

slavery, in mediocrity, in a false comfort and a fake peace and a lukewarm happiness. Speak truth to your fearful parts, that God will never leave you nor forsake you, but will be your help and strength. Speak the truth that God is good and that He loves you perfectly. And speak the truth, that life to the fullest is found in knowing Him.

After the disabled man answers Jesus, we read in v. 8-9:

Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

As the man responds to Jesus in faith, he is healed, and picks up his mat and walks away, leaving the pool and his old life behind him. For those of you who have responded this morning that you want to get well, **what will it look like for you to follow Jesus in faith? What is the action He is calling you to?** Maybe it is to share what He is calling you to with a friend who can pray for you and hold you accountable. Maybe it is to seek out a counselor, or an older and wiser believer. Maybe picking up your mat is to extend forgiveness to someone who hurt you and to move past the bitterness. Maybe it is to dump out the alcohol, or hand over the credit cards, or start to take care of your physical health. Or maybe it is to respond in faith and trust to Jesus, asking Him to be your Lord and Savior.

Near the end of the passage we read this morning, we read this:

Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working."

God is at work this morning. How is he calling you to respond to him today?

Let's close by praying this:

God, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief. I believe that you are good, that you love me, that you will never leave me, that life to the fullest is found in obeying you, and that you can strengthen me for whatever you are calling me to do today. Speak your truth to the part of my that still has doubts and fears. Give me the strength and courage to pick up my mat and walk, to leave my old way of living behind and follow you into the life to the full you have for me. Amen.