

Poolside with Jesus

John 5: 1-15

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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This morning we begin a winter series on transforming encounters in the Gospel of John. Our goal each week is to step into the stream of the stories about what Jesus did and said. Why? Because we hope that we will get carried along in the forgiveness, healing, and transformation that the people in the Bible experienced.

God chose to act in the world where we live by entering it in Jesus Christ. Jesus related to people in all kinds of situations. And he never left them the same. He healed them, challenged them, and changed them. He was with us just a brief time before he ascended to heaven. But he has not left us alone. He still speaks. He still acts. He still heals, challenges and changes. He does it now when people encounter his Word in the power of the Holy Spirit. We meet him in these precious records that are the gospels. Every gesture, every word that Jesus said then is still alive with power for us today. We approach his word with expectation and openness. We ask the Holy Spirit to join us to Jesus through these stories. Then we apply our minds, imagination, hearts and wills to probe how we may enter these accounts—how we may find ourselves inside the story. We want to hear how the words of Jesus spoken to people back then are words he still speaks to us right now, in the very relationships and situations of our daily lives. So, shall we try it?

The man at the Pool of Bethesda had lost the will to be well. He had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, longer than the life span of many people in those days. He spent his days lying on a little mat near a pool on the northeast side of the Jerusalem temple. There was a legend about that pool. It was said that from time to time an angel would come down and stir the waters. The first person into the pool after that would be healed of any disease. Now I think this was merely a legend. If you look closely at John 5 in your Bible, you'll see that there is no verse 4. It's been moved to a footnote. That's because no manuscripts of the Gospel of John before the year 300 actually have that verse. It was a later addition. It makes sense to me that such a verse isn't genuine. After all, it doesn't fit the character of our God to just sporadically give healing to whoever wins some grotesque race of the sick and crippled to the water. I think that the legend actually gave people a place to dump their family members who were chronically ill and unable to work.

Every day, they would get brought to the pool of Bethesda to lie in wait of a vain hope of healing. It must have been a heart-wrenching, pathetic sight. Jesus went there, and amidst all that terrible human need, his eyes fixed upon this man. He asked him, “Do you want to be well?”

The invalid at the pool had been waiting for healing for decades with no results. By now, he actually feared being able to walk again. His whole life had been defined by illness. To be well would be a frightening venture into the unknown. We, too, may suffer disability in body or soul and lose the will to get better. At the literal level, we know about what’s called *hospital psychosis*. People who stay in the hospital for weeks may actually fear going home. They lose the ability to imagine wellness and begin to be defined by the weakness, even if their bodies are getting better.

Any of us, in fact, can come to fear the wholeness that we crave. Spiritually, we may become paralyzed. We may find ourselves unwilling or unable to get any further than we have for the last “thirty-eight years.” Some chronic problems may be blocking us from deepening our love for God. This disease may prevent us from living in the peace and joy that the Father calls us his beloved children. It may thwart our efforts to give to others in caring, growthful ways. Spiritually speaking, we may be lying by the pool, unable to get going, barely hoping for a miracle. Jesus’ question strikes in the heart: do you *want* to get well? Let’s look at 3 examples of this:

1—Some of us have a chronic weakness in our prayer and worship life. We cannot get beyond superficial prayers. We can’t go deeper into the Bible and see how it relates to us. Our minds always flit away to something else. Trusted people have told us of God’s nearness, and we believe them, though the times of actually feeling the Father’s loving presence have been rare. We have the sneaking suspicion that if we actually opened up our hearts to God, he would immediately send us into the most uncomfortable situations. We fear he will ask us to give up everything we like and make us into some kind of obnoxious super Christian. So though we ache for him, we keep our distance. And we are spiritual cripples.

2—Some find we can never quite get our lives together to be of any use to others. There is always one more horrendous day at the office or one more crisis in a relationship to resolve. There is one more project at the house that has to be done, or one more weekend needed for personal space to “process the week.” We can’t ever get enough rest to have energy for people beyond our little circle. We can’t ever get our minds to slow down enough even to pay attention to the ones we

love. We can never quite get organized to move out towards the need in the world. We may even fear that the flood of needs we encounter will be overwhelming—so we just hunker down and stay home.

3—Some are afraid of their hearts and some of their minds. Some of us can't stop thinking about our doubts and questions. We can't figure out the reason for suffering, the hateful behavior among Christians, the seeming randomness of why some believe in God and others don't. These questions paralyze our Christian lives. And for some, they cover over a deeper fear: I worry about the person in farthest Borneo who never heard of Jesus because I really worry about whether or not Jesus accepts me. I throw up the problem of evil in the world because I fear that what has happened to me just means that God doesn't love me. And these questions are so terrifying that I hide my heart behind the doubts of my mind. Or, some of us never go deeper into Christ with our minds because we fear our questions have no answers and that if we really press into God, it will all fall apart. So we just try to believe without thinking, but that keeps us weak and immature.

To all these forms of spiritual weakness, Jesus raises the question, “Do you want to be well?” For the man at the Bethesda pool, desiring health and risking the effort to stand were as essential to his healing as Jesus' miraculous power. The voice of fear within him shouted, “No! I don't want to get well because I don't know how to live in wholeness. This is the only life I know.” He was stuck in the way he had always been. So he offered the excuse, “There's no one to help me to the pool. Whenever the waters are stirred, someone gets in before me.” In other words, “I can't. No one helps me. Everyone is stronger than me. It's hopeless.”

Jesus, though, would not accept this excuse. He called forth a deeper yearning inside this man. He summoned him to remember, way back, that once he had wanted to live a full life, a fruitful life of strength and love. So, too, Jesus prods us even now with his question. “Do you want to be well?” He calls us to remember our heart's yearning to live as the Father's beloved children, in forgiveness and love for others, in meaningful relationships and fruitful service. He reminds us that we used to dream of living in spiritual health and abundant grace. His question reaches past our fears to the depths of our spirits where we still have hope, “Yes! Yes I do want to be well!”

So Jesus speaks. “Get up. Pick up your mat, and walk.” He wasn't very nice about it. In fact, before the man felt ready, Jesus jump started his faith. Get up! Sometimes we just have to stop thinking about it and rise up on wobbly legs, trusting in the power of God. The man picked up his mat—that nasty little bedroll

that he lay upon year after year, that symbol of his weakness that ruled him. Now he picked it up and carried it away. Jesus called him to a new life. He said Yes and started to stand. Jesus gave him the power to do it. He was no longer the Invalid. Now he would be known as the Man Who Had Been Healed.

What would it look like for Jesus to summon us to get up and walk in the very area of our chronic weakness?

Now, of course, we have to pause for a moment and be sure we realize three things this does **not** mean:

- 1) I'm not saying that we should tell a clinically depressed person, "Hey! Jesus says Buck Up!" That would be cruel.
- 2) I'm not saying we should say to the elderly, "Hey, if you have faith, you will always feel well, act young and not feel the effects of age." No, the decline and decay of these mortal bodies is something we all have to deal with if we live long enough—nobody gets the aging process reversed. Jesus came among us healing the blind, the leprous and the lame, even raising the dead. But those acts were a foretaste of life in the kingdom of God to come. Everyone he healed eventually died. They got ill again, or they grew old, or they suffered violence or accident. We may experience God's intervention of healing in our physical bodies from time to time, but no one stays healthy and lives forever in this form. No, the healings were a foretaste of the new life that is to come in our resurrection bodies in the future.
- 3) Nor am I saying to people deeply wounded by abuse, or deeply ensnared in rage or addiction that hearing this story you should be transformed in an instant. It just doesn't work that way. An account like this one shows us the dramatic, concentrated power of Jesus' transforming love. Normally, though, all healing and change unfold much more slowly in our lives.

With that said, let's look at one more thing Jesus said to the man he healed and then we'll put it all together in our lives. When Jesus saw him later, he said, "See, you are well. Sin no more, lest something worse befall you." The man who had been an invalid for 38 years knew very little of how to live in wholeness and health. It would have been very easy for him to slip back into helplessness. As soon as he got stressed, he would be tempted to bring out his old excuses, "There's no one to help me. Everyone gets there before me. I can't." He would have wanted to put that nasty bedroll down on the ground and lie there in helplessness.

But Jesus ran into him again. And he gave him a word of great encouragement and a word of warning. “Look. You are well. Sin no more lest something worse befall you.”

For this man, sinning would have been to see himself as an invalid again. It would have been going back to old ways of thinking about himself. That would have ruined him. Jesus commanded him to think of himself as one who had been touched by the power of Christ: See you are well! Believe it. Live it. Trust me.

Now we can move towards conclusion by asking, “Do any of Jesus’ words touch a part of your life?” He said, “Do you want to get well? Get up. Take your mat and walk! See you are well, sin no more.” Let’s go back to some examples:

- For those of us who are *spiritually anemic*, his words might stir us to change. Maybe we will set a timer for 12 minutes every day, and stay there with our Bible and our spirit open, saying, “All right, Father, I’m listening. Wherever you send me I will go. What you ask I will give, if you help me. I will trust that you mean me good. I need you enough to risk trusting you.”
- For the *chronic doubters*, Jesus’ command may be just deciding to live for six months *as if* you fully believed in Christ Jesus, committing yourself to learning and living in the answers Christianity has for the suffering and chaos in the world. You willingly lay aside your doubts for a season. Or it may mean for others, committing yourself to truly engaging your questions with your mind. Doing the reading. Talking to the pastor (I’d love to see you!). Getting into a study group. Developing spiritual muscles in your mind to see if knowledge will take you deeper into Christ.
- For those who can *never get our lives together* enough to serve, it may mean simply praying about how you are called to love, and then doing that first. Striking out further into the world in some way, before you feel ready, to see what will happen. Jesus declares me well. I will rise and go, right now.
- His command might echo in our ears just before giving in to the same old anger with the children—Get up. Don’t make an issue of this. You know it isn’t important. Take up your crankiness and walk in love. His love has healed your rage. Live in it.”
- Another might hear his command just before purging the meal eaten with guilt. “Get up. You don’t have to do this anymore. Eat your food and receive it with joy. Jesus declares you accepted, beautiful in him, and well. Live a new life in my acceptance and love.

- Still another might hear him speak, “I will not take away the weakness of age from you. You, too, must pass through death to come to the place I have prepared for you. Yes, you will have pain to bear. But in me, though your body falls apart, you are well. I have work for you to do. I will enable you to live in peace even with pain. I will enable you to love even in weakness. My grace is sufficient for you. In me, at the deepest level, you are well. Now get up and live all the way to the end.
- Yet one other might hear his words even as you are tempted to sink into a moody sullenness. “Get up. This is not your life anymore. In me you are well. Pick up your mood and walk in love.”
- For those struggling with a constant sense of guilt, who have confessed what they know to be sin, made amends as much as possible, but still feel the weight of it, Jesus says, “See, I have forgiven you. I have taken your sins to the cross. Would take them off the cross? Would you steal them from me, the one who has bought them? No, live now in my forgiveness.

Wherever we may be in our life in Christ, we may identify with this man at the pool. We realize how long we have been stuck with a particular weakness. And we listen to Jesus’ words, “Do you want to be well? Get up and walk.” And as we dare to rise, we cling to his words, “See you are well. Sin no more. Your sins are forgiven. Your eternal life is secure and it has already begun. I have work for you to do of eternal significance. You are mine and you are loved. Don’t go back to the old ways. You are free. Don’t sink back into the darkness. Live in my light.” In Jesus’ name, you are well. Go forth in that healing!