

Sermon for Zion – May 17, 2020

Hymns: 291 – Thou Whose Almighty Word; 723 – Lord, in this broken world (to Great Is Thy Faithfulness); He Will Come and Save You

Scripture: John 5:1-9

Sermon: “Do You Want To Be Made Whole?”

John 5:1-9

Afterward Jesus returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holy days. Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches. Crowds of sick people—blind, lame, or paralyzed—lay on the porches. One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, “Would you like to get well?”

“I can’t, sir,” the sick man said, “for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me.”

Jesus told him, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!”

Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking!

You can go there today. You can travel to Jerusalem, enter the Old City through the Lion’s Gate, walk maybe a hundred metres, go through an entrance on your right, come into the lovely garden complex of St. Anne’s Church, and there they are, large as life, the very spot where our story from John took place, the breathtaking Pools of Bethesda. You can stand at the edge, look down, marvel at how big, how deep these pools are – larger, deeper than any Olympic pool. Mind you, they don’t look much like they did in the days of Jesus; they don’t even look much like pools anymore - they’re ruins now, ruins on top of ruins. But the archaeologists have been busy, and they’ve cleared away the centuries of rock and dirt and fill and here they are. There are a few displays with pictures of what they would have looked like, back then, back two thousand years ago, back in the days of King Herod, who built aqueducts to fill them, to provide water for the thirsty city, and to provide pilgrims to the Temple with public baths to wash and prepare themselves to enter the Holy Place.

The pools were also known as a place of healing. When fresh water from the northern pool, a reservoir, was released into the southern pool, a ritual bath, the water would bubble up, and it was thought that the healing power was greatest at that very moment. The first one in had the best chance, it was thought, of being miraculously healed. And not only in the days of Jesus; later, the Romans built temples to their healing god, Asclepius, around the pool; Byzantine Christians built an enormous church right over top of the pools, and the Crusaders built their own holy hospital

there too. As a result of all these massive constructions, and the neighbourhood growing close around, you really have to stretch your imagination to picture the scene with Jesus, and the man who had been an invalid for so very, very long.

The pools have changed. But people haven't. And Jesus hasn't either. And so the story is important to us today. I'll tell you why in a bit.

Jesus and the disciples have travelled to Jerusalem for a feast, a religious holy day. Like countless other pilgrims, they stop at the Pools of Bethesda to prepare themselves before they enter the grounds of the Temple. It is a majestic sight; the vast pools, the sparkling water, the roofed colonnades providing shade from the hot sun. Less majestic, perhaps, are the dozens of blind, lame, afflicted, even paralyzed souls, waiting for a healing touch, waiting for the waters to bubble, a sign that the power was at its peak, and then, the rush to be the first.

Jesus and the disciples stand, watch, wonder. There is one among the infirm to whom Jesus is drawn, one, he is told, who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. How many times in those thirty-eight years had this man come to the pool for healing? How many hours, how many days had he been here now, laying upon his mat of straw, thin comfort from the hard stone beneath?

And Jesus approaches this man, and looks upon him, and looks into him, and sees his heart, and sees his need, and asks him the strangest question imaginable:

“Do You Want To Be Well?”

He's been an invalid for thirty-eight years. He's come to the pool. He's hoping, he's waiting, for an unlikely miracle. He's hoping for a healing. He's desperate for his life to be changed. And now this one comes to him and asks, *“Do You Want To Be Well?”*

The man blinks, puzzled, looking up at his questioner. Who would ask such a thing? Isn't the answer obvious? Can any answer be more obvious? Thirty-eight years, his life has been burdened by this infirmity. Thirty-eight years of frustration, of difficulty, of exclusion. Does he want to be well? With admirable patience, the man answers:

“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.”

Notice: the man doesn't actually answer the question. Jesus had asked, "Do you want to be well?" The man answered with a description of the process, an outline of his complaint, but he doesn't answer the question which Jesus actually asks. Instead, like so many of us do, he answers with a complaint: I'm not fast enough to get to the water in time.

But the complaint concerning the immediate problem of getting in the water is not what Jesus is primarily concerned about. Jesus, as he always does when speaking to people, is going not to the surface but to the heart of their problem. Jesus is addressing the deepest need of their spirit, the deepest need of their heart. And each time, people don't get it. Each time, focussed on their immediate problem, their immediate need, people don't get it what Jesus is addressing.

And so, focussed on his complaint, what this man wants is for Jesus to throw him into the pool. While what Jesus had offered was to make him whole.

For when you really look at the question Jesus asked the man, you begin to see what he is offering. And it is more than physical healing. What Jesus offers is to make the man "whole." Not just "well", as in our translation; the word John uses is "whole." Complete. Do you want to be made "whole." And that's a big difference.

The man had been infirm for thirty-eight years. The word used for "infirm" is "asthenia," a weakness, a debilitation, a chronic loss of strength. One day, perhaps, he found himself unable to do the work he once did; he was so tired. Then, sometime later, he found it difficult to even stand up from the table. One fateful day, he was unable even to rise from his bed. To care for his personal needs. To reach for a glass of water. Thirty-eight years. He had gotten someone to bring him to the pool, a last-ditch effort, perhaps, to find healing. But now he lies by the pool alone. His family, his friends, had largely given up upon a healing. Upon him. What does thirty-eight years of this do to someone? What does it do to their spirit? What does it do to their heart?

And so Jesus doesn't ask the man if he wants to be healed. Jesus asks him a bigger thing. He asks him if he wants to be whole. To be released not just from the infirmity which plagues him, but from the damage of heart and spirit, the internal scars which the years of sorrow have carved.

The man, of course, misses this; fixated upon his physical problem, he outlines only the difficulty there. He can't even see the deeper damage his long years of sorrow have caused within him.

But Jesus sees. And he says to the man, “*Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!*” And – a miracle – instantly, the man was healed, says our translation. Instantly cured, says another. But that’s not what John wrote. John wrote, “made whole.” “*Immediately the man became whole.*” Not just healed. Much more: made whole.

I said earlier that this story is important to us, here in 2020 Charlottetown and beyond, and not just to some old fellow in Jerusalem long ago. And it is important to us because right now, if you ask just about anyone what their big problem in life is, they’ll say, “Covid-19,” and the isolation protocols attached to it. And that is a problem. For some, really, it has been not much more than an inconvenience; for others, devastating. But what this whole situation has done, what has made it so difficult for so many, is that it has amplified all the other problems which are hampering our sense of wholeness. Some have told me it has put their problems in perspective; more frequently am I told that problems which were once peripheral to daily life – kind of a nagging sense of disquiet – have become, in our current situation, overwhelming.

Scrimping, scrimping, but somehow, never making ends meet. A marriage growing ever more cold. Less and less communication between us and our kids. An argument with a family member, with a friend, that just won’t go away. Warnings from our doctor: don’t smoke this, don’t drink that, start doing this, stop eating that, and we can’t seem to change our behaviour, and we just want to give up. Addictions that we promise every day to overcome, yet to which, every day, we seem to succumb. Aches and pains, increasingly preventing us from doing what we want to do, then need to do, then over time the aches and pains are becoming a true disability, an infirmity, until it seems as though we can’t do anything at all.

These are problems. These are real problems. And our Covid-19 world and the accompanying protocols are amplifying their effect. But many of these problems which we identify are external. What these problems are doing to us deep inside – what they are doing to our soul, our spirit – do we ever consider that? Isn’t that the greater injury? Aren’t those the scars that really need to be healed? I was listening to a discussion on the radio of how the fear and uncertainty caused by Covid-19 is sowing the seeds of PTSD in large swathes of the population – medical practitioners and psychologists are beginning to recognise that now – but how about recognizing the injuries to mind, soul and spirit which come through long-held frustrations, limitations, humiliations, addictions, disappointments, compromises, failures, defeats – grief? This damage, this scarring, this incompleteness, is the kind of thing Jesus recognised in the heart and soul and spirit of the man at the side of the pool.

“Do you want to be made whole?”

“I can’t do anything about this problem,” says the man.

But Jesus can. And does. *“Immediately the man become whole.”* Not just healed; made whole. Which is a much bigger thing. Because you can be healed, and still not be whole. And yet you can be infirm in body, and yet be whole. Let me explain.

I know – and you know – people who have no physical or financial or social challenges, but they’re miserable. They’re physically fit, maybe even attractive, maybe financially well-off, secure employment, well-connected socially, all the things that are supposed to make you happy, but they’re not. Gossip magazines and tabloid TV shows are filled with stories of the talented and beautiful and wealthy who end up in rehab, or divorce courts, or highly publicized flame-outs, or, God forbid, victims of suicide, victims of their own internal brokenness, their terminal spiritual asthenia.

On the other hand, I know – and you know – people who are infirm, or who have limitations, or disabilities, or challenges and yet who have within them a core of optimism, of cheerfulness, of concern for others, of contentment, of joy. Sure, they’d much rather not have limitations, and their limitations are a constant challenge, but still, somehow, deep inside, they are well. Truly, deeply well. And they inspire us. And we wonder, if I had their struggles, I would be bitter and miserable and I would make everybody around me bitter and miserable, or die trying. But these people aren’t like that. Despite their circumstances, they are nonetheless whole.

And they are. Because wholeness is far more a spiritual matter than it is an economic or physical issue. And Jesus knew that. He made a point of it time and again. We could mention so many more, but let me bring you back for a brief moment to another man long infirm. This man (Mark chapter 2) was lowered through the roof of a house in Capernaum – Peter’s house, it turns out – to be close to Jesus. And what does Jesus say to this man, this paralyzed man, so obviously in need of physical healing? *“Son, your sins are forgiven.”* And only then – having dealt with the man’s wholeness – is his physical healing addressed. But the wholeness – the forgiveness – the healing of spirit – that came first. That was the more important thing.

Long before Covid, I visited a man in Emerg. Something with his heart. “How are you?” I asked. He went on for five minutes, pretty upset, about how they made him sit in the waiting room for what seemed like ages before taking a look at him. I

tried again – “But how are you?” And he asked me if I ever spent a night in emergency, on an uncomfortable stretcher, nobody paying much attention to you, having to beg the nurses for a glass of water.” I listened. Then I asked again. “How – are – you?” And this time it got through. And his eyes filled with tears. And he said, “I’m afraid of dying.” And then – and only then – were we able to pray. To pray not only that he be healed, but that his fears be stilled, that his soul and spirit find peace. That he be made whole.

“Do you want to be made whole?” Do you? You may not have had a debilitating illness for 38 years, but long-held frustrations, limitations, humiliations, disappointments, compromises, failures, addictions, defeats - grief – exacerbated the impact of Covid-19, may well have caused injuries to your mind, soul and spirit. You are plagued by self-criticism, by a glass-half-empty view, by stubborn pride, by a lack of energy, a lack of motivation, a lack of desire, or enthusiasm, or joy; your relationships with others are marred by suspicion and a negative attitude, by an accumulation of resentments and slights and offences. The smallest thing defeats you; your attitude is one of constant complaint; you harbour deepset fear, not only of the present, but the increasingly uncertain future. This damage, this scarring, this lack of inner peace, is a sign of inner woundedness, of spiritual incompleteness. You may not be laying on a mat by a pool waiting for an unlikely miracle, but you need the touch of Jesus nonetheless. *“Do you want to be made whole?”*

Do you? You can make excuses – *“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.”* But ultimately what you need to do is to reach up to the hand of Jesus, and invite, accept, welcome the wholeness he brings. And let the true healing begin.

“And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed and walked.” He took up his bed – the symbol of his infirmity, the prison upon which for so long he lay – he took up his bed, and he walked. You can reach out to Jesus right here, right now, and ask him to make you whole. And right here, right now, that healing can begin. And you can rise up from where you are today, changed. Healed. Made whole. Covid-19 or no Covid-19, protocols or no protocols, you can be made whole.

Reach up to Jesus, and invite, accept, welcome the wholeness he brings. And let your healing begin. Amen.