

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda”

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*“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?’”
(John 5:6).*

Archaeologists excavated this pool of Bethesda. It is as John describes it. It’s huge, trapezoidal in shape. It has porches around it. And it has steps in each corner so that people could get down into the water. Apparently, the pool was fed by an intermittent spring, which would periodically cause the surface water to bubble. There’s superstition surrounding this pool. People believed that whenever the surface of the water was disturbed, it indicated the presence of an angel. At that moment, they believed the water had sudden curative powers, but only for the first person to get in. So, the sick gathered around the pool watching and waiting and when the water was agitated, everyone scrambled in.

Silently, we scoff at their superstition and think ourselves far more sophisticated. Yet, wherever there are natural springs today, there are folks who are convinced the water has curative properties. We scoff at the superstition, but just a few years ago, copper bracelets were all the rage for people coping with arthritis . . . until they were largely debunked by double blind studies. We scoff at their superstition, but how many are paying big bucks today for some herbal remedies that are unproven, untested, unregulated, and maybe unsafe?

In our text, a man has been sick for 38 years, and has spent most of those years sitting by the pool of Bethesda. 38 years! It’s been his life’s work: four decades, lying on a mat, waiting, hoping for a miracle to come from that pool. For 38 years he’s been trying to be the first one in. “No one will help me” he explains to Jesus. “Someone always jumps in ahead of me” he complains.

Around the pool are other needy people. . . the blind, lame, paralyzed. So, he and his sick friends gather every day and sit next to the water, in the shade offered by the roofed colonnades. They complain about their aches and pains, about how tough it is, how bad the economy is. They complain about the outsiders with their minor maladies racing into the pool before any of the regulars can even get on their feet. They complain about crooked, oppressive government and the rude treatment from the temple guards and the soaring costs of health care. They are helpless prisoners of their own genes or of circumstance or of societal forces or of an all-powerful state.

Long ago, they resigned themselves to this life by the pool, and have learned to accommodate it. I don’t think all of them are really interested in change. After all, there are some compensations for being a victim. Sitting there by the pool, they’re among friends, mostly. Passers-by often give alms, enough to buy bread every day, a little extra during the holidays. You don’t have to take total responsibility for your own physical, emotional, or spiritual status. At times it can even be comfortable, lying there by the pool, dozing, people watching, kvetching.

We are well-familiar with this mentality. If you’re not happy or healthy or prosperous, it has to be the fault of someone or something. The government or your boss or your parents or forces in society that categorize you and pigeon-hole you. For sure, to be categorized or lumped together by others is an affront to your personal dignity. Yet some are a little too quick to allow this to happen, and to live down to the expectations others place on them. Some in our culture even seem to be vying for a crown of thorns, for when you’re a victim, the pay-off can mean you don’t have to be compassionate or grateful or generous. You can put your own problems first. The payoff can mean you don’t have to take responsibility for yourself.

We can’t know for sure, but I think there’s at least a possibility some of this is going on here. The man is sick. He’s been sick for thirty-eight years. He can’t make it into the pool, and the sense of it is that he’s resigned himself to the status quo. He’s a man waiting for life, waiting for something to happen in the future before he starts living in the present. We all do that.

We hold off on being generous with our time, our skills, our money, until that time when we’re all put together. “Someday I’ll pray more and study Scripture more and really engage in the life of the church, but I can’t just now; it’ll have to wait.” “Someday, I’ll be active in the community, I’ll do my part, but now I simply don’t have the time.” “Someday, I’ll deal with the addiction.” “Someday, maybe after the next promotion, I’ll begin to tithe.” “Someday I’ll spend more time reading with the kids.” “Someday I’ll make an appointment with a professional counselor.” “Someday, I’ll ask her to marry me, and start a family. For now, I’ll just live with her.”

We are never told what the man’s illness really is, but I think part of the problem is fear. He’s afraid of change, afraid to take chances. It seems he’s comfortable in his routine, but there’s no joy that comes from producing something or serving others. There’s no courage in his life, no commitment to learning a new skill . . . just day in, day out resignation to the status quo. In the 4th century, Augustine wrote, “Fix me, Lord, but not yet.”

And I think the whole business irritates Jesus. Do you notice? This man doesn’t even say “Fix me, Lord.” It’s Jesus who has to take the initiative with him. “Do you want to be made well?” On first glance, what kind of question is that? It’s like asking someone in the ICU, “How are you?” “Do you want to be made well?” But within the question of Jesus there is another. Do you want to be player, rather than merely an observer? Do you really want to live life now, or do you want to

continue waiting for life?

“Do you want to be made well?” The man starts complaining that he can’t get into the pool fast enough, that someone else always jumps in before him. He’s still focused on that darn pool. Maybe he’s hoping Jesus will help him reach it in time. Jesus doesn’t acknowledge the pool’s healing power. He ignores the whole business and simply says, “Get up, take your bed, and walk.”

And to his credit, the man accepts the invitation. He takes a risk. He takes the first step away from his victimization, away from the security and comfort of his routine, away from the dependence on the charity of others, and delves into a brand-new life.

So, what about you? Do you want to be made well? Do you really want to change? Do you want to take complete responsibility for your own life? There are real limitations, also for people of faith. People with strong faith can become genuine victims of crime or of the drunk driver. We can suffer disabling diseases of mind and body. But I’ve always admired those who do not define themselves by what they can no longer do. I admire those who make decisions every day based not on their limitations and maladies, but on their potential, on what they are still able to do. And I think that’s part of being who God wants us to be, no matter where we are in life, young, old, or in our prime. God has meaningful work for us to do all our lives. But being who God wants us to be doesn’t happen automatically. We don’t get there simply by putting in our time. It requires many deliberate choices, taking the first step every day to make something good happen. We become who God wants us to be when we work and serve with the welfare of our families in mind, or this church, or this city. It all requires a certain amount of change, and courage, and lots of tentative steps. And it starts when deep down we know our lives matter, and they have meaning, and how we live them out can have a tremendous impact on the world around us. The task ahead isn’t so much about finding something worth loving, but to start loving that or those God has already given you to love, such as your spouse, your children, your church, your community.

Do you want to be healed? The man must answer the question Jesus put to him. Jesus isn’t going to impose His own wishes on the man. The man was free to choose.

We all must answer that question. Do you want to change? If so, do it. “Pick it up and walk.” Don’t wait for someone to come along to drag you into the pool. Ask for God’s help and then take the first step toward becoming the person God wants you to be.

There’s an interesting postscript to this story. Days later Jesus bumps into this man again. This time it’s in the temple, and that’s a good sign. Maybe he’s there to thank God for the great mercy he’s been given. And Jesus says to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” (Jesus is kind of churlish with this fellow, isn’t he? Apparently, it’s what *this* man needed, whereas with others he was far more gentle, because that’s what they needed.)

But what does he mean “sin no more?” There’s no indication about the sin Jesus is alluding to. And if the fellow had been lying around on that mat for so many years, the range of possibilities as far as sin goes are limited. Unless. . . unless the sin has something to do with lying around on a mat all those years . . . wasting his life, cheapening the precious life he had been given him by the way he lived it.

Could it be that Jesus is calling us, individually and collectively, to sin no more, but rather pick up our mats and walk? Is he calling us to love our lives enough to stand up and walk; to serve and work and think about someone else’s troubles for a change?

What’s the good news in this text? Let’s start with the obvious. Jesus healed the man. The man wasn’t asking for it and didn’t seem to know Jesus was capable of it. But Jesus knew He could help and knew this man needed His help and He had compassion on the man. Jesus saw a guy who was hemmed in and bound by forces outside his control, and perhaps by some self-imposed limitations too. Out of love and compassion, Jesus freed the man of all that was constraining him and let him go.

That same Jesus is at work in your life and mine, with the same love and compassion. He sets the prisoners free, not just those who are locked up by the authorities, but also those who are bound by illness and injury, those who are hemmed in by cultural forces, and those who are constrained by their own self-imposed limitations. Jesus sets prisoners free, in this life and in the life to come. Sometimes he does that even without our asking.

His grace always takes the first step. As Jesus intruded into this man’s life with grace, so he has intruded into your life with grace. For example, at your baptism, he came to you long before you could ever know to ask Him for help. He came and lifted the cloak that covered you in darkness. He introduced the light to you and converted you from being a victim of inherited sin, to an heir of God and co-heir with Jesus. He became your brother, your Friend, and surrounded you with a great big family of brothers and sisters and friends to help you along the way.

In the Lord’s Supper, he intrudes repeatedly and gives you the gift of his body and blood. It changes you and releases you from all the binding straps of sin and strengthens you for service.

Jesus takes the initiative with us all our lives. Every day He is the first to love us, long before we ever turn our attention to Him. The intrusive grace that entered this man’s life has entered your life and mine and has set us free and will set us free. Not just to pick up our beds and walk, but to take us to the place where our feet will leap like those of the deer, and where we will run and not be weary, where there are no imprisoning forces within or without. Thanks be to God.