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“After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew<sup>a</sup> Bethesda,<sup>b</sup> which has five porticoes.<sup>3</sup> In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.<sup>c</sup><sup>5</sup> One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.<sup>6</sup> 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?**”<sup>7</sup> The sick man answered him, “*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.*”<sup>8</sup> Jesus said to him, “**Stand up, take your mat and walk.**”<sup>9</sup>

At once the man was **made well**, and he took up his mat and began to **walk**.

Now that day was a sabbath.<sup>10</sup> So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “*It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.*”<sup>11</sup> But he answered them, “*The man who **made me well** said to me, ‘Take up your mat and **walk.**’*”<sup>12</sup> They asked him, “*Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and **walk**?’*”<sup>13</sup> Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there.<sup>14</sup> Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “*See, you have been **made well!** Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.*”<sup>15</sup> The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had **made him well.**”

When most of us hear the word “pool” – we envision a clean, fun, even luxurious place, often with healthy, beautiful people. We may envision comfortable chairs and cold drinks. The pool in today’s story is not that kind of pool. The scene of today’s scripture is a pool in Jerusalem located not far from the temple. The area around the pool is visited or populated by a wide variety of people who are invalids, paralyzed, lame, blind or afflicted with some other physical condition. It probably didn’t smell very nice. The time is during one of the major Jewish festivals when thousands of worshippers came to worship at the temple. Many of these worshippers could be counted on to throw some money in the direction of the sick and infirm. This was certainly one of the better times in

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<sup>a</sup> That is, *Aramaic*

<sup>b</sup> Other ancient authorities read *Bethesda*, others *Bethsaida*

<sup>c</sup> Other ancient authorities add, wholly or in part, *waiting for the stirring of the water; <sup>4</sup>for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had.*

the year for the poor souls by the pool. Tourists came by the sheep gate on their way to the temple with change from buying animals to sacrifice.

All these broken people are gathered at the pool in the belief that when the water is stirred up, the first one into the pool will be the only one who gets healed. Everyone else is left to sit, dripping in misery, begging for alms from passers-by until the next mad rush of pathetic humanity to the bubbling waters. There doesn't seem to be enough healing going on to justify all the people gathered at the pool. Maybe there was another function being fulfilled other than healing – a community was formed. It wasn't a pool party but a pity party every day.

Then one day Jesus comes to Jerusalem for the festival. Passing by the pool he observes a man who, we're told, has been ill for 38 years. For 38 years he has been defined by himself and by others – by his sickness, by his brokenness, by his lack of wellness and wholeness. After dealing with something for 38 years, most of us would assume that a condition was permanent.

Unlike the Royal Official I spoke about last week, this man is not seeking Jesus in any way. He is the opposite of the official who sought Jesus out and asked him to heal his son. The man by the pool makes no expression of belief or trust or faith in Jesus whatsoever. He doesn't ask Jesus for anything. He has no idea of the identity of the man standing before him who looks him in the eye and asks, *"Do you want to be made well?"* The man who has been ill for 38 years doesn't answer Jesus' question yes or no. Instead he answers with his own explanation about how healing takes place. *"I never can get to the water in time, some young whipper snapper always gets there first."* The government is looking at the healthcare system in the United States because it is helping to bankrupt so many individuals, families and businesses. I don't know what the answer is, but looking at this story in the Bible I do know it is a very bad health care system when only one person gets healed and the rest just get wet!

The pool is certainly not where the people with financial resources went for health care in Jerusalem. The people by the pool are not only broken in body and spirit, they are lacking in resources. They apparently are lacking families that would enable them to be better cared for in their time of need. What Jesus does for this man is not a case of God helping those who can help themselves. This is a case of God coming into someone's world to do something for them that they cannot possibly do themselves.

Jesus asks the man, *"Do you want to be made well?"*

What a question that is, one that requires some thinking before we answer.

*“Do you want to be made well?”*

It isn't necessarily as simple as it may appear. Sometimes folks can get so comfortable with what they know- that the pain or difficulty of adjusting to being well or not defined by their illness or disease can be more than they want to handle. What would it be like to be made well or whole? What changes would that mean for us? Where are the paralyzed parts; the wounds, aches, and pains; the withered constricted places within us that are preventing us from being well? Some folks are emotionally paralyzed because they never were taught how to properly handle and express their emotions in a healthy way. Others are wounded by the actions and words of people that scarred us or misshaped us for years. Some among us are physically broken or hurting from any number of causes from accidents to war, from addiction to cancer, or just from the mileage of life. Some of our pains are no fault of our own. Some of our difficulties are due to our own poor choices and foolishness. However it has happened, when we're broken, it is easy to move toward seeing ourselves as victims.

*“Do you want to be made well?”* is not an easy question to answer. All the man in the Gospel story has known for 38 years is his illness and the stinking surroundings by the pool and the sheep gate. In some ways he is like a man who has been in prison for almost 40 years who is finally granted parole. For most of his life, his days and nights, weeks and months, years and decades have been ordered, predictable, and structured. Many such people have a great deal of difficulty coping with life on the outside. Many find it too much, like James Whitmore's character Brooks in the 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*.

Life outside the prison walls of our illness or brokenness may be something we say we long for, but the changes it brings or requires may scare us to death. Jesus says to the man, **“Stand up, take your mat and walk.”** At once the man was made whole. The power of God in Jesus is strong enough to overcome a 38 year condition. The man has no idea how the healing took place, he only knows that it happened, because he stands up, takes his mat, and walks out of the pity party by the pool into the crowded streets of Jerusalem. The man is made well and that is when the trouble starts.

John tells us the day the healing took place was a Sabbath. Suddenly, what was a feel good healing story becomes a conflict story. At the time, the three core ways that the Jewish people defined who was a part of God's covenant community were observing the Sabbath, the practice of circumcision, and their dietary laws. If you did these things you were in, if you didn't you were not. Violations of the Sabbath may not seem like a big

deal to us, but they were in Jesus' time. It was against the Sabbath law to carry a mat around because that was work. It is a Sabbath day during a festival so the streets are packed with people and guy is not exactly lugging around a nice clean Sealy Posturepedic mattress. This is a stinking, dirty mat that this guy has used for who knows how long. In appearance and aroma I'm sure it was not appealing and after 38 years of being ill, I'm also sure this guy was not in great shape to be carrying anything around through the streets. Why would Jesus tell him to do that? Why wouldn't he tell him to throw it away?

Jesus knew that sending a guy like this out into the streets was going to provoke a response. Jesus is always looking to provoke a response in us and in others when he speaks or acts. He healed a man who was sick for 38 years – what will the response be? When the man is confronted about carrying his mat on the Sabbath, presumably by people with some religious authority, he replies, *"The man who **made me well** said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'*" Amazingly, he didn't even know who Jesus was! You'd think if you'd been ill for 38 years and someone healed you that you'd at least ask for a name, a business card, or a phone number. Someone like this could be very good to know.

The people confronting the man don't say, *"Oh, were you sick and now your better, that's great!"* They don't ask the man to tell his story. They don't care that after 38 years a man who was broken is now well. What they care about is that a tradition, a rule has been violated. Whenever we lose sight of individuals because we are obsessed with rules, procedures, or processes, we are getting off track. People should always come first.

Later on, Jesus finds the man in the temple, affirms the fact that he is truly healed saying, *"See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you."* The man's response to this instruction is to run straight to the authorities who he knows are angry and to reveal the identity of his healer. It didn't take him long to run back into sin, did it? That should serve as a warning to all of us. When we have been touched or healed or blessed by Jesus in a significant way we have the responsibility of turning away from sin and being a **witness for Jesus, not against him**. Like the man, we can either stand up for Jesus or betray him by the choices we make and the words we speak.

Like us, this man had a choice to make. He could have gone back to the sheep gate and the pool and shared with others that God had given power to Jesus to heal

people and make them well. After 38 years you would hope that this guy would have developed at least a little compassion and caring for his fellow sufferers. Now that there was someone around who could do something about it, you would think he would share the good news with them. Not only that, a real witness, a true advocate, would have pleaded with Jesus to come back to the pool, just like Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer pleads with Santa to go to the island of misfit toys. *“Please good sir, there are so many beside myself that need your help. Please come back with me to the pool so that others might know the freedom and wholeness you have given me.”*

Sadly, there is none of that. The man’s sin is his unresponsiveness. His lack of commitment to Jesus and compassion for others is a worse sin than carrying a mat on the Sabbath.

When we are blessed by God through Jesus one way we are to express our gratitude to God is by telling others who may need similar help and healing as ourselves – have you tried reaching out to Jesus? Would you be willing to come with me to worship if I picked you up and we sat together?

One would hope that a part of being made well would be having a heart that is concerned for the needs of others.

The response of the religious authorities to a man being healed after 38 years was not to praise God or congratulate the man but to start persecuting Jesus because he was telling people to carry mats on the Sabbath. Jesus answer to their criticism is simple, *“My Father is still working, and I also am working.”* God created the Sabbath as one of the 10 Commandments for people to have a day to rest from work and busyness and to worship and give thanks to God. But God didn’t stop working with the giving of the 10 Commandments – Jesus says the Father is still working and so is he.

The response Jesus wants to provoke becomes clearer. Are the people in John’s story, are we, open to the fact that God is still working in new ways to bring healing, wellness, and wholeness into the world? Are we open to God acting in ways that are beyond our experience or understanding or that contradict a long held tradition or belief? Or are we worshipping a way of doing things that over time has become disconnected from the reason for doing it in the first place?

The reason for observing the Sabbath was to worship the God who creates, heals and sustains human beings. Observing the Sabbath reminds us of what is truly important in life. **In every generation there are people who consider themselves quite religious or spiritual who end up worshiping the traditions they are familiar**

**with, rather than the God to whom the traditions originally intended to point.** There is a story from another religious tradition that bears this out:

*“When the guru sat down to worship each evening the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat expired, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later treatises were written by the guru’s scholarly disciples on the liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.”*

When our spiritual life or religious practice gets disconnected from the God to whom it points, our life of faith, no matter how sincerely or strongly held, becomes misdirected.

The rejection of Jesus in this story is a rejection of the possibility of new and unprecedented ways of experiencing God. A healing miracle challenges conventional understandings of how the world works and provides unmistakable evidence of the new possibilities with Jesus.

Five different times in this passage the phrase *“made well”* is used to emphasize what God has done through Jesus for this man and what the Lord wants to do for us as well.

God doesn’t want us dripping with misery as part of a pity party.

God longs for us to experience wholeness, but first we have to be open, willing, and possessing the courage to change so when the Lord asks us, *“Do you want to be made well?”* we can say, *“Yes!”*

And we can stand up, take up our mat and walk into a new era in our life following Jesus.