

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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March 17, 2024  
John 5: 1-18; Lent 5.

There were numerous festivals held throughout the year in Jerusalem, though there were three major festivals that many, if not most, Jews would go up to Jerusalem for, Passover being the most prestigious. We do not know which festival is referred to at the start of our story, just that it was a festival, which means there were crowds and the operations around the temple were running full fledge. Now if Jerusalem had a nice little map, like many tourist destinations, that number the major attractions so to help you hit the major sites and find your way around, I suspect the pool of Beth-zatha would have been among the numbered sites on the map.

The pool is described as an established site, pools lined with Porticos and not far from the Sheep gate that would take you up to the temple mount. In an area, and in a time of festival, when there is so much emphasis on being clean and about being able to fulfill the requirements of the law concerning sacrifice and worship, this site for cleansing and healing would be a significant place. As Craig Keener writes, “Healing shrines were common throughout the ancient world, especially for the worship of Asclepius and other popular deities renowned for healing powers.” Asclepius is the god, as we talked of last week, associated with both healing and serpents, his symbol still prevalent today. It is not clear this pool was a shrine of Asclepius, but the principle was the same – a place associated with healing, and this one at the base of the temple which considered certain ailments unclean, and would require healing and cleansing before entering.

Therefore, the healing of certain physical ailments had the power to make one clean, as seems to be the case in our reading this morning. Because after the man is finally healed, we find him the temple, a place he was not eligible to enter nor physically capable of entering prior to Jesus’ healing.

I say all this as context to our story. Because in such a place, we would likely assume certain things. That someone who went to the pool wished to be healed, wished to be made clean, desired to be able to worship in the temple that one would look up at from the pool itself. We would likely assume the place exists to bring healing and wholeness, to enable people to draw closer to God’s presence and to participate in the temple worship and festivals. Why else go there, unless you are just following the tourist sites on your map?

We might say something similar of those who in 2024 choose to participate in a season of Lent, or of holy week, and the whole celebration of Easter. For Lent is a season of introspection, a season of deepening in faith, a season to celebrate our ability or opportunity to change and repent, to press closer to Christ. Why go through all this traditional stuff if these are not your intentions?

We make certain assumptions because of the nature of a place or its activities. For example, I used to assume that people that went into Congress were interested in the activity of governance. I no longer assume that. It seems many of them are more interested in finger-pointing, parading, power dynamics, sabotaging and so on. Most do not possess the knowledge nor the willingness to engage in the tedium of actual governance and policy-making. Perhaps you get my point. We assume certain things that aren't always true. We assume someone who is sick wants to get better, someone separated from God's presence wants to be reunited in God's presence. We assume religious leaders are committed, first and foremost, to people encountering God's presence, forgiveness, healing, and power.

Therefore, Jesus' first words to the man might catch our attention. For when he encounters someone there at this pool of healing, a man we are told had been there for as many or even more years than the average lifespan, he asks the man a question. He asks him "do you want to be made well?" I've heard different figures for the average life-span in Jesus' time. I expect it was somewhere a little over thirty years. This means that this man, whatever his actual age, is already past the average, and would be considered old; not like he has a whole life still to live. He might feel that he is in his waning years either way.

It may be a surprising question, because we might assume that if the man goes there every day that he clearly wants to be made well. But maybe these were the rhythms that he had grown used to; maybe these were the meaningful patterns, his social circle, how he has learned to navigate his world. This is what he knew and which seemed to work in its own odd way. And he is now an old man, by average calculations. What is more, everyone else seems to buy into the fact that extenuating circumstances had prevailed for that long. And when asked if he wants to be made well, we start to hear his litany of excuses. "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.'"

Now there are a number of gaps in this story, chief of these being the man's answer. We don't get a clear answer, other than his excuses. Perhaps Jesus just takes his explanation/excuse as an indication that he wishes to be made better. Because the next thing we learn is that Jesus heals him, tells him to take up his mat

and walk. And the man does so. And then the story moves on quickly leaving us with many questions. Did he rejoice? Was he reticent? Did he know what to do next or where to go next being that his patterns were now upended? But what is clear is the story seems more interested in larger questions than the particulars of this man's story. In fact, we are left to assume that he is lame or paralyzed based on his lying on a mat and being unable to get into the water. Though we are not specifically told – just that these pools attracted many who were “blind, lame, and paralyzed.”

And once the man is healed, the story moves on to another related drama, the religious leaders being horrified that the man is carrying his mat around on the sabbath, an infraction to the technicalities of sabbath laws.

You see, in addition to our assumption that if someone has gone to the trouble of laying by the healing pool, they want to be healed, we may also assume that if someone is in the business of the temple and healing and sacrifice and reconciliation, that they would want and would celebrate someone's being healed, made clean, and thus able to reenter God's presence. But we don't learn of any joy or celebration by those in leadership, those referred to in the story as “the Jews.” For the religious leaders immediately go into crisis mode, scrutinization mode wanting to know who is responsible for healing this man on the sabbath, and why he is carrying around his mat on the sabbath. Makes you wonder why the pools were open on the Sabbath if nothing was possible nor permitted.

It reminds me of a scene from the movie Ford vs. Ferrari, a movie I very much enjoy. In the early scenes, in a build-up to the main event of going to the 24 hours of lemans, Carroll Shelby has recruited the rather unconventional Ken Miles to be his driver and they are competing at a smaller circuit race. But the regulations guy comes around and finds that the luggage compartment of Ken Miles' car is not the precise measurements, and wants to disqualify the car. And so Ken starts to lose it, saying, “Bill, when you were a little boy, did you think, when I grow up, I want to go to the fabled Willow Springs raceway, and I want to enforce paragraph 15.4 section 2b of the SCC regulations on Luggage capacity?!”

In a similar vein, it makes me wonder how it is that someone who works in the religious establishment, who works in the operations for the temple and who is concerned with honoring God has gotten to the point that rather than celebrating this healing, this transformation, this change, he is walking around quoting paragraph 15.4 section 2b of the sabbath regulations about carrying a mat.

You see, we sometimes assume we all want to grow and change and repent and find a deeper sense of wellness and wholeness. Why else would we come to church? Why else would we want others to come to church? But, sometimes our various patterns and rhythms are so entrenched. Maybe the patterns and the rhythms themselves have become the goal, and we don't even know what wellness means anymore. And so, this all begs some questions, questions we might consider for ourselves in this season of Lent.

What does it mean to be made well? We can surmise what this meant for the man in the story – that it meant being restored physically so he could walk, so he could re-enter the temple, though we, again, do not know his spirit, his joy, his attitude, or how this all played out for him. We assume it led to good. But again, what would it mean for you? If Jesus asked you, “do you want to be made well,” what is the wellness you are seeking? And do you really wish to be made well, to be different than what you are, to live differently than what you have known.

And if we in the church are really interested in making others well, what is the wellness we are hoping for? And how would we recognize it, and how would we celebrate it? And how would we bend the rules to make it happen?

In John's gospel, there are certain motifs. One being Jesus moving towards the cross and the religious leaders getting agitated and eventually strategizing how they can do away with Jesus. There is an attention to the larger story. And in our story, that is where the narrative arc goes, to hearing about the religious leaders putting a mark on Jesus' back. So, at times, the characters in these stories don't seem to have a lot of choice, their stories are told to illustrate the larger movements that can't be altered. Jesus was on a path of going to the cross. The events were set in motion.

But as listeners to this story now, we come after the cross. And the premise is that because of Christ, we can repent and change. We can be forgiven and made well. We can be ambassadors of grace and wholeness. But the questions remain, do we wish to be made well? And what is the wellness that we seek? And what is the wellness we seek for others? And how much would we be willing to change and flex to make such things possible?

If this were a class, I'd have you take out some paper and a pen and start to write out some answers to those questions. This is not a class, but I would encourage you to do so; to sit down and try to write out some answers to those questions for yourself. Do we want to be made well? And what is the wellness that you seek? What would it look and feel like? And what is the wellness we seek for others?

And perhaps the answers we would write to these questions might be the start of a very interesting prayer conversation with the Lord.

And all God's people said... Amen.

### *Jesus Heals on the Sabbath*

**5** 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 Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. <sup>3</sup> In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. <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. <sup>16</sup> Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” <sup>18</sup> For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.