

## Wanting to Get Well When Push Comes to Shove

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
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*John 5:1-11*

Today we continue our sermon series on the signs and miracles of Jesus by looking at the story of a healing that happens on the Sabbath. Now in each of the gospels, there is at least one story of Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, and the reaction from the religious authorities is always the same. They are disturbed. Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath and the religious authorities are filled with fury. He heals a bent over woman and they begin to tell the crowd, there are six days on which work is to be done, come then to get healed. You untie your beasts of burden and give them water on the Sabbath. He's at a dinner with some Pharisees and a man with dropsy, he heals him and sends him on his way and tells the Pharisees, you're hypocrites, if you have a child or an ox fall in a well, you'll help him. He's challenging the system. And they don't like it. Today's Sabbath healing miracle comes to us courtesy of John's Gospel—watch how the authorities react.

*After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

*Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 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?' 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.' Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.*

*Now that day was a Sabbath. 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.' But he answered them, 'The man who made me well said to me, "Take up your mat and walk." ' They asked him, 'Who is the man who said to you, "Take it up and walk"?' Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.' The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.*

One of the interesting things about health and healing—  
If this morning's text and stories like it are any indication  
Is that it is not always immediately and readily embraced by those to whom it is offered  
Or by the community that witnesses it when it starts to unfold.  
This can be true for individuals and families and communities and whole societies.

There is something in us that can get used to the way things are  
Even if the way things are is painful or otherwise dysfunctional  
Even if there is a lot of collateral damage that comes along with maintaining the status quo,  
whatever it is.

Or maybe we simply get overwhelmed,  
Too sick and tired to spot any of the signs of hope around us,  
Too sick and tired to believe that a new perspective is possible  
Or to have the energy to even imagine something different.

Perhaps we even experience some benefits—some secondary gains—  
In our illness as an individual or as a society. Like the Hebrew children out in the wilderness after God delivered them in the Exodus, longing to go back to Egypt, where at least they had three hots and a cot, there can be a certain security in the familiar, even if it is oppressive.  
If you've been watching the TV show *This Is Us*, you see that story line playing out in Kevin's life, as he has returned to drinking. People lapse back into old unhealthy patterns all the time. Newness of life can be scary.

It can be tempting to believe that returning to the bondage we know beats having to trust God to lead you and me *and our larger world* into newness, especially when change is required of us or when it feels like our hopes have been dashed once too often.

No wonder offers of healing are not always immediately and readily embraced.

Take today's passage from John's Gospel.  
You perhaps noticed what happened when Jesus came upon the man  
Lying there by the pool of Bethzatha  
Which was renowned for its curative properties.  
When Jesus asked the man who had been ill for 38 years  
"Do you want to get well?"  
The man didn't say Yes. He didn't say No.  
To be fair, he didn't say No either.  
What he did instead was provide a couple of excuses as to why  
He hadn't yet experienced healing.  
"Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool  
And, when I am making my way, someone steps in front of me."

Now the tradition that had grown up around that pool was that  
when the waters were stirred up, which only happened every so often, and a person waded in them,  
they'd be made well.

There was a whole group of people who gathered around that pool on the regular, waiting for the bubbles, looking for healing to come. To add another wrinkle, some ancient authorities added that that it was only the first person into the water after it bubbled who would be healed. First come wasn't just first served, it was the only one served. You can see how the whole thing could literally become a when push comes to shove, dog eat dog, zero-sum game, Darwinian experience. This isn't the sort of thing that encourages cooperation among people.

We don't know if the guy had been hanging out around that pool, off and on, for the full 38 years of his affliction, but we do know that by the time Jesus found him, his spirit was crushed. His community had failed him, the odds were stacked against him. He couldn't even answer in the affirmative when asked if he wanted to be made well. He couldn't imagine getting well.

But in this story, as in many, Jesus operates outside the confines of the system. Rather than hanging around and helping the man elbow his way into the pool the next time that waters get roiled, Jesus simply says to the man, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." And the man does.  
He doesn't have to be first in the pool.  
He doesn't have to get in the pool at all.  
He just needs to stand up, take his mat, and walk.  
And he does just that.

You'd think that would be cause for rejoicing, right? The feel-good story of the year. Headline in the Jerusalem post: Local man lame for 38 years, miraculously walks again. However, the religious authorities are not happy to see it. They're upset. "It's the Sabbath. Why are you carrying your mat?" Hmm.

Of course, he's carrying his mat **because that's what the man who made him well said to do**, so that's what he tells them. But you might ask why John's Gospel has Jesus ask him to carry his mat in the first place. It's as if Jesus knows that this is going to stir things up, and perhaps offer an opportunity for healing.

It's going to place the issue in stark relief.

What matters more? Purity in ritual observance? Or the expression of compassion to a person who has been at least partially paralyzed and left by the wayside for more years than anyone could count? Well, when the religious authorities can only see a man violating the tradition by carrying his mat on the Sabbath and not a healed child of God, you know what their answer is.

One of the great contributions Marcus Borg made to my understanding of and approach to scripture was to set the conflict Jesus had with the religious authorities of his day in terms of a battle of values. One side—for understandable reasons—valued purity—purity of tradition, purity of religious and ethnic identity, purity of ritual observance. The other side, represented by Jesus, valued compassion above all else. For Jesus what ultimately mattered was compassion—compassion to the sick, the lame, the stranger, the outsider, the immigrant, the hungry and thirsty, the widow, the orphan, the vulnerable, those who were in prison. And if that meant healing on the Sabbath, so be it. If that meant running afoul of parts of his religious tradition and all the rules that had built up around it, so be it. If that meant going toe to toe with a system that looked the other way when the lame and blind needed help, when the person from another religious tradition (like a Samaritan or a Gentile) needed a welcome, when those mired in poverty went hungry or thirsty, so be it. He was up to the task, because he came to be the embodiment of a love **that would not look the other way**.

So I wonder if Jesus' question to the man in today's story, "Do you want to get well?" wasn't also in its way a question to the authorities who were so bent on purity of ethnic and religious identity and religious observance, so set on determining who was out and who was in, that they not only failed to celebrate the healing of a lame man, they also overlooked so many other people who needed help and welcome.

Perhaps in healing the man by the pool of Bethzatha Jesus was asking the religious and political system of his day, "Do you want to get well? Or at least a little healthier?" Can you even imagine that it is possible?

I don't know about you, but since Friday my imagination has been challenged. Can I even imagine that it is possible for our society, for our world, to get well. Heck, maybe not even fully well, just a little bit healthier. Do we want to get well?

Maybe that's a question for our day, too. Because, as the massacre in the two mosques in New Zealand on Friday morning makes clear, there are still people in the world who place misguided notions of purity (ethnic, religious, or otherwise) above the call to live together in peace and to welcome one another in compassion. When people who are in worship get gunned down—and it's happened in all traditions—when people who are in worship get gunned down in worship, there's a

problem. To see the consequences of Western white supremacist ideology on display like it was in the actions of that shooter is horrifying—and it should be. It ought to drive us to our knees in prayer and then cause us to stand up to clearly and unequivocally challenge any and all who spout or fail to question such ideas. We have to question each other.

If we want to get well, when push comes to shove we'll need to stand up. Stand up for compassion and grace and tolerance and mercy.

Earlier in the sermon I said that the man had been sick for too many years to count. Actually, maybe you caught this, it was 38 years. 38 years of not being well.

John took pains to say that it was 38 years. That's really sort of an odd number, 38 years. For students of scripture, and there would have been more of them when John wrote his Gospel—more who knew the Torah at least—the number might have taken them back to Deuteronomy 2:14, which says that 38 years was the length of time that the Israelites had traveled in the wilderness from Kadesh Barnea to crossing the Wadi Zered. I had to look that up. You can look it up, too. It took 38 years, Deuteronomy says, for the entire generation of warriors who set out from the Exodus and couldn't imagine embracing something different to perish so that the community could be ready to enter the Promised Land.

38 years the man was sick. 38 years the people wandered.

I have a colleague whose name is Scott Erickson who wrote the following piece on Friday, about imagination and getting well. This is what he said:

*"Is there any meaning in all this?" asked a woman to a priest after the Sandy Hook shooting.*

*"Not yet," replied the priest.*

Erickson goes on to write:

*My heart goes out to the victims of a hate based mass shooting in New Zealand that just happened. Human beings.... again... human beings.... gathered in their religious practice we define as Islam... were targeted because of their imagined threat.*

*Imagined threat.*

*That's all that it is. Someone's imagination.*

*Our imagination is the force behind our greatest accomplishments and greatest atrocities. Space flight and Jewish gas chambers both came from imagination.*

*Be attentive, says Erickson, to what you are being told to imagine. It has consequences. And once again, that consequence of imagination has cost human lives.*

*We grieve today. And I hope that all the loss and grieving could at least resurrect a better imagination.*

It is incumbent upon all of us to imagine what it would be like to act first in compassion, to put compassion first. That's how we get well.

Maybe Pastor Susan was right in her moment for young disciples this morning. It all starts from one person. Like Kevin Casto's bunch of beanie babies, and how his mom and dad decided now that he's an adult and working in the real world that they should donate them to the church, and Susan Graceson came up with idea of pew pets to so that children under the age of 8 have something to hold on to during worship, and then ML Sharp decided that there should be a book written about it, and Gordon Peil wrote and illustrated that book.

What If all the loss and grieving could help us today and every day to have a better imagination?

I think I want to get well. In Jesus' name. Amen.