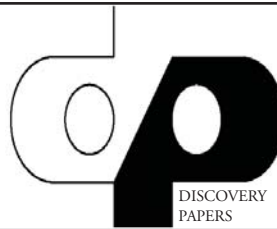


DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?

SERIES: PORTRAITS JOHN PAINTED



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John 5:1-16
3rd Message
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Our Junior High School group used to have a ‘NO WHINING’ sign on prominent display. (They may still, I haven’t checked recently.) It is good to learn at a young age that hardship is inevitable, but a bad attitude is not. Some obstacles can’t be moved, inequalities abound, life is often unfair, but our choices are not determined by our circumstances.

Whining comes easily, doesn’t it? Words of sarcasm and despair; self pity and lashing out at others ... these flow easily from insecure hearts. But what is an alternative to whining about life’s troubles that is neither hypocritical nor pretentious?

There is a beautiful insight in lyrics of a slave-era spiritual: ‘Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrow, nobody knows but Jesus.’ Insecure hearts are helped by knowing that Jesus knows our trouble, even if no one else does. He knows and his knowledge moves him to loving action.

We have come to the third message in a series, *Portraits John Painted*, that considers up-close encounters with Jesus found in the fourth gospel. We turn now to chapter five (skipping the account of the woman of Samaria until later). In this message we meet a man with a troubled life.

The Pool of Bethesda

This is a very bleak scene—a population of hurting people who were gripped by superstition.

John 5:1-5 NASB:

¹After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. ³In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, {waiting for the moving of the water. ⁴For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had.} ⁵Now a certain man was there who had an

infirmity thirty-eight years.

The bracketed section of the preceding text is not found in most modern translations. These sentences were not penned by John. They were probably added later by a copyist who was trying to set a context that would make sense of v.7 (“Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me”) for readers who had not been to Jerusalem. Verses 3-4 accurately record the commonly held superstition, but ‘angel visits’ did not occur in this manner and John does not endorse this line of thinking.

Let’s look carefully at the scene. The Bethesda pool was a ghetto of sorrows. Most cities, in ancient times and modern, will have places where the rejected and the homeless will congregate. But this scene is different. The folks described here are not necessarily poor or cast out, not banished like lepers. These were drawn to the pool, trusting a falsehood—they were there by choice.

At the Bethesda pool God was regarded not as One who answers prayers or raises up the needy, but rather as a capricious tyrant who dispatches angels to stir up water on a whim. Of course, bubbles would occur randomly because of an underground spring or something similar, but any association of stirred water with healing was pure superstition.

Further, the Bethesda multitude lived in an environment of mutual antagonism. This was not a misery-loves-company kind of place. Each invalid was wary of the others. Every person by this pool was unwell; each of them in a ‘me-first’ competition with the other. The pool of Bethesda was a dark place, populated by sufferers who reinforced the darkness in each other.

Finally Jesus’ actions call our attention to a man whose sorrows include loneliness in addition to illness: “I have no one; no one to put me into the pool.” Most invalids in first century Jerusalem did not join this crowd. It seems likely that this man’s choice to give credence to ‘angel visits’ had alienated his family and friends.

Jesus Asks a Question

John 5:6-7:

“When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

Jesus’ question seems callous at first reading. The sick man does not answer directly, but rather discusses the failure of his current strategy.

John 5:8-9:

“Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath,

Most of Jesus’ healings occurred in the course of his travels and public ministry or because he was sought out by someone in need. But in this case he has deliberately gone to the pool of Bethesda—apparently alone. He chose one man to speak to. All of Jesus’ actions here are purposeful. His compassion for a sufferer is evident, but he is also, as always in these texts, displaying truth about himself. Jesus chose that this event should occur on the Sabbath and he specifically directs this man to walk with his bed in violation of familiar Sabbath restrictions. His question, “Do you want to get well?” is about more than freedom from physical illness. It will include a challenge to self-defeating superstition and to life-denying legalism.

Creating a Crisis

Jesus creates a crisis for the man who is told to pick up his mat—indicating that his days by the pool are over. He cannot return to his old life with its familiar sorrows. Further, he is sent off alone to face formal harassment by the leaders of the Jews. This man is being required to answer the question, “Do you want to get well?” Jesus healed his malady and put him in circumstances where he will have to choose spiritual health or refuse it.

John 5:10-14:

“and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids

you to carry your mat.”

¹¹But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”

¹²So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”

¹³The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

¹⁴Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”

If Jesus’ question in verse six appears insensitive, his challenge in verse fourteen seems even more so. But the Lord is not threatening this man with a worse and longer physical ailment. He is warning him that spiritual health, the allegiance of his heart, is even more important than the condition of his body.

John 5:15-16:

¹⁵The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

¹⁶So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him.

Verse sixteen is important: For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill him, because he had done these things on the Sabbath. Jesus had made himself vulnerable by acting in love toward a man who had been gripped by illness for thirty-eight years. His enemies would press their persecution and one day take his life. Surely, we do not call to mind, often enough, what it cost the Lord to heal us.

Making a Decision

The action that follows the miracle of physical healing is the most important part of the whole story. Let’s go back and make some observations about the unfolding events in verses 10-16.

We might first note the absence of joy. There is no word of thanks, no awareness of the presence of God. Sabbath keeping details are immediately in the foreground and a miraculous, life changing blessing is ignored. Contrast this with a healing that occurs a short time later—Acts 3:8: ⁸“He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. ⁹When all the people saw him walking

and praising God,¹⁰ they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.”

Returning to John 5 we observe that these Jewish leaders quickly adopt a threatening demeanor. They considered deliberate Sabbath breaking to be a serious crime, and are anxious to cut off anyone who instructs others to carry a mat on the Sabbath day. Not knowing Jesus’ name the healed man answers: “The one who made me well said take up your bed and walk” (v.11).

What did the man mean when he said: “The one who made me well told me to do this?” Is it bold witness, taking his stand alongside the unnamed miracle worker despite the implied threats of his questioners? Or is he saying, “Blame him not me.” Is he identifying with Jesus or selling him out (note v.16)? Though I suspect the man turned away from Jesus in the end, I think this ambiguity serves a purpose. We should examine ourselves. How do we react when powerful voices ridicule or threaten the cause of Christ? Do we respond with witness or evasion?

We have noted that Jesus’ question in verse six, “Do you want to be made well?” and his challenge in verse fourteen, “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you” are both attention-arresting. This is so in both cases because Jesus is looking beyond physical illness alone. Do you want to get well—be healed in body and soul?

‘Getting well’ will require rejecting the spiritual pride of haughty legalists who condemn a man-made-new for walking in freedom and carrying a mat on the Sabbath. The bondage they represent is the ‘worse thing that might come upon you’ which Jesus warns about.

Finally, alone in Jesus’ presence, this man has come to a decision point. Will he give allegiance to Christ or knuckle under to those who intend to persecute the Savior? John does not reveal how this man’s story ends and the reader must take up the challenge.

What About Us?

What does a life made truly well consist of? It calls for a new honesty about us and how we enter relationships that

are risky for love’s sake. It includes forgiving our enemies and bearing the burdens of others. It insists on joy and freedom without apology. Jesus’ question reverberates. “Do you want to get well?”

The portraits in John’s gospel are all different. Jesus never starts a conversation the same way. Not everyone needs to be questioned like the man at the pool of Bethesda. There are some people whose suffering is so deep that the questions “Do you want to be made well?” or “Are you are willing to be changed?” are the wrong places to start. Jesus may choose to act in power or offer a word of comfort before he calls for a response of discipleship.

However, John 5:6 cannot be passed over and for many of us these words are the challenge we need. Do you want to be well? Have we become (after so many years) used to sinful restrictions, accommodated to our weakness? Do we prefer superstition and self absorption—avoiding change that encompasses our hearts as well as our circumstances?

We might be inclined to pity a man alone by the pool of Bethesda who had suffered an infirmity for 38 years. But Jesus chose to love him instead of pity him. He acted in power to accomplish physical healing, and then faced him with a question of allegiance. The love of Jesus and the call of discipleship is a pattern that hasn’t changed. How will we respond?

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows my sorrows. Nobody knows but Jesus. Jesus gave his life for me. And he intends to make me well, the question is will I let him?