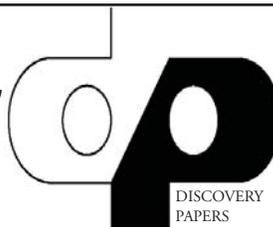




## SEE, YOU ARE WELL



Catalog No. 20131027  
John 5:1-15  
11th Message  
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October 27, 2013

When I was twenty years old, I began to dream about writing on the coast. A friend and I were driving on Highway 1 near Half Moon Bay, south of San Francisco. It was a stormy winter day. The cypress trees, bending in the wind, looked like they might blow over. She said maybe we'd get married some day and live on the coast. She'd be a lawyer and I'd be a writer. It's the kind of thing you say, I guess, when you're young and a moment overtakes you. We weren't even dating at the time. She married someone else, of course.

Her comment returned to me occasionally, especially when I visited the coast, and it triggered a different dream. I pictured myself alone in the winter. Outside, the wind and rain would be pounding my coast-side shack in Half Moon Bay. Inside, I'd be wresting poetic prose from my battered soul. Your classic tortured artist. It was more of a nightmare than a dream, I suppose, but to me, it was romantic. The dream, however, went unfulfilled.

What comes of our hopes? And what does Jesus have to do with them? In John 5:1-15, we meet a man whose hopes had become an empty dream. Then Jesus showed up. How does Jesus show up in our hopes?

### The question

John 5:1-6:

**<sup>1</sup>After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.**

**<sup>2</sup>Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. <sup>3</sup>In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. <sup>5</sup>One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be healed?”**

The narrative conveys the popular belief that invalids could be healed at certain times in the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. The invalid in this story hoped that he could

be healed if he happened to be in the water when it was “stirred up” (verse 7). Verse 4, rightly absent from the ESV translation, is a later addition and not part of John's original manuscript. The addition attempts to explain why people at the time believed that the pool had healing properties: it was believed, according to the addition, that an angel stirred up the waters at random times, thereby making healings possible. Whether such was the popular belief or not, however, is not part of John's concern. In any event, the invalid in this story clearly hoped in the possibility of healing at certain moments. The disturbance in the water is most likely explicable by the presence of underground springs.

Jesus, in Jerusalem, visits the pool. He goes to where people are sick.

Although a multitude of invalids crowded around the pool, Jesus speaks to “one man.” Why only one, and why this man? John doesn't say. He does, however, describe the longstanding nature of the man's affliction: he's been an invalid for thirty-eight years. John also describes Jesus' awareness of the man: Jesus “saw” him lying down and “knew” that he had been there a long time—not that he had been lying there a long time that particular day but that he had come there for many days to lie there.

Based on what he sees and what he knows, Jesus speaks to the man. Specifically, he asks the man a question: “Do you want to be healed?” The word translated “healed” can convey physical healing but can also convey a deeper kind of healing, as in Luke 15:27, where the father in Jesus' parable received his wayward son back safe and “sound.” Jesus' proclivity for double meanings in the gospel of John, especially the deeper spiritual meaning, indicates that his question to the man conveys such a double meaning. The question, then, to the man, is, “Do you want to be healed—physically and, more importantly, spiritually?” In other words, “Do you want to be healed through and through?”

We should be used to this in the gospel of John by now. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about being “born again,” he was evoking something other than literal rebirth (John 3:3). When he spoke to a woman at a well in Samaria about “living water,” he was offering something other than literal

water (John 4:10). Nicodemus was flummoxed, and the woman at the well misunderstood Jesus. In like manner, the man by the pool doesn't catch the deeper meaning.

On the one hand, Jesus is *not* asking whether the man wants to be healed physically. He saw the man, and he knew of his long-standing affliction. He knows the man wants to be healed physically. On the other hand, Jesus is asking whether the man wants to be healed spiritually, even if the man does not yet have the wherewithal to understand the question. Which is the bigger problem: a broken body or a broken heart?

## Probing the deeper regions

Like the man by the pool, are we unaware of what Jesus wants to do in our lives? With a question such as "Do you want to be healed?" Jesus is probing the deeper regions of our hearts, but perhaps we have our guards up to the extent that we misunderstand the question. Could it be that we don't understand the question because we don't want to understand the question?

The prophet Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things, / and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). It's easier to identify a sick body than a sick, deceitful heart. It's also easier to *want* healing for a sick body than a sick, deceitful heart. It's easier to trust an M.D. with a scalpel than a spiritual surgeon who cuts away at your heart. I once questioned someone about what was going on in his heart, and he angrily informed me, in words not fit for print, what I could do if I wanted to talk about his heart.

The first thing to do with this narrative is to correctly interpret the question and hear Jesus ask it of us: "Do you want to be healed?" Really healed? Deep in your heart?

How does the man by the pool answer the question?

## The answer

John 5:7:

**<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 going another steps down before me."**

Based on how the man understands the question, how does he answer it? He knows that Jesus knows he wants to be healed (that's assumed), but he explains for Jesus, a visitor from Galilee, how healing happens around these

parts. An invalid must be in the water when the water is stirred up, and he doesn't have the means to get into the water in time. He has not the agility he needs to go down into the pool. What could be more infuriating? To be healed, he needs agility, but because he lacks agility, he needs to be healed!

Literally, the man by the pool tells Jesus that he doesn't "have a man" to put him in the pool and that someone else always literally "goes down" before him. Of course, the man wants to be healed, but he can't be healed because he doesn't have what he needs: a man, a strong man, to help him go down into the pool. The man's story is all about what he can't do and what he doesn't have. He can't compete.

We wonder about the man by the pool. When he first started coming to the pool, and when the water bubbled up, did his hopes rise with the water? Has it since become an empty dream? Does the intermittent disturbance of the water now simply serve as a painful reminder not only of his condition but also of all that he doesn't have? Like the woman at the well, who had five husbands and was living with a man out of wedlock, the system isn't working for the man by the pool.

## Empty dreams

Like the man by the pool, many of us don't think we have what we need and who we need to make our way successfully in this world. We don't have the intellect, the looks, or the charisma; we don't have the man, the woman, or the connections. For many of us, our story is about what we don't have and what we can't do. Like the man by the pool, perhaps, we have lots of conditions that haven't been met or aren't likely to be met. It's a competitive world, and, well, many of us feel that we just can't compete. Someone else always steps down, or has someone to carry him down, into the pool before us, so to speak. Someone else gets the grades, the trophy, the girl, the guy, the job, the promotion, the pregnancy, the following, whatever. For some of us, our hopes, like those of the man by the pool, become empty dreams.

What comes of our hopes? What comes of the hopes of the man by the pool? Jesus asked him a question. The man answered the question. Now Jesus issues the man an order—and a rather surprising one at that.

## The command

John 5:8-9a:

**<sup>8</sup>Jesus said to him. “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” <sup>9</sup>And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.**

Note what Jesus does not do. The invalid thought he needed a man to wait with him and carry him down into the pool when the time was right, whereupon the magic waters might just work their wonders. Jesus does not fulfill the man’s hopes; on the contrary, he transcends them. He blows his hopes, uh, out of the water!

Jesus tells the longtime invalid to literally “rise,” pick up his portable straw mattress, and start walking. Now, it’s one thing to command an invalid to rise, bend down, and walk; it’s quite another thing for said invalid to, in actuality, rise, bend down, and walk. What happens? Before the man did anything, he was healed. As one who has been healed, he has the ability to obey the command and he, in fact, obeys it: he uses his new strength to rise, bend down, and walk. For thirty-eight years, he needed the mattress, or one like it; now, he needs it no longer, and he can do whatever he likes with it. He governs the mattress; the mattress no longer governs him.

The invalid didn’t have a strong man to take him down into the pool. He didn’t need a strong man, because he had Jesus, a stronger man. Jesus didn’t take the man down into the pool; instead, he told him to rise up and walk, all by himself. Jesus does for the man what the pool was supposed to do but couldn’t do.

## Jesus transcends hopes

It doesn’t matter whether you have the intellect, the looks, or the charisma; it doesn’t matter whether you have the man, the woman, or the connections. It doesn’t matter what you can’t do and what you don’t have. It doesn’t matter that your conditions haven’t been met. It doesn’t matter that you can’t compete. It doesn’t matter whether someone else steps down, or has someone carry him down, into the pool before you. None of that matters—if you have Jesus, that is.

Do your hopes sometimes seem like empty dreams? Don’t worry: Jesus does not fulfill hopes; he transcends them! He blows them out of the water. Jesus doesn’t carry you down into the pool, so to speak; he commands you to rise up and walk, and even to mount up with wings like eagles. Think outside the pool!

Or, for me, think outside Half Moon Bay. When some friends purchased a condominium in Capitola, just south of Santa Cruz, they offered to let me use it—and then I remembered my old, unfulfilled dream of writing by

the ocean. I called them and set aside a week to write in their condominium overlooking the Monterey Bay—in winter, of course. I spent the week writing in a gorgeous condominium in Capitola, not a rundown shack in Half Moon Bay. The gentle breeze barely rustled the leaves. I never saw a rain cloud. The temperature was warm enough for sunbathing. Not once did I wrest anything from my battered soul, for my soul was at rest.

It took about thirty years for my dream to grow up. When it did, it became something different. It became something better. The Lord didn’t fulfill my hopes; he transcended them.

Jesus, though he has healed the man, isn’t through with him. Neither, when he transcends our hopes, is he through with us.

## Walking with mattress on the Sabbath

John 5:9b-13:

**<sup>9</sup>Now that day was the Sabbath. <sup>10</sup>So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” <sup>11</sup>But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’” <sup>12</sup>They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’” <sup>13</sup>Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place.**

Jesus could have visited the pool of Bethesda on another day, but he visited on the Sabbath. He could have healed a man on another day, but he healed a man on the Sabbath. The Sabbath, in Jewish thought, foreshadowed the final day of rest, when God’s people would be made whole. A healing by the Son of God on the Sabbath, therefore, signifies the in-breaking of God’s great day of rest. The Sabbath is a fine day for healing.

However, from the perspective of the Jews—that is, Jewish authorities in Judea—the Sabbath is not a fine day for carrying one’s mattress around. From their perspective, carrying one’s mattress constituted work, and it was against the Mosaic Law to work on the Sabbath. Therefore, they have it out with the former invalid for taking up his mattress.<sup>1</sup> The healed man says he was just following the orders of the “man” who had healed him. Note: he thought he needed a “man” to carry him to the pool; instead, he met a “man” who healed him and, by the way, enabled him to carry his mattress.

Who told the man to walk around with his mattress? Jesus, of course, but the man never got his name, and Jesus melted away into the crowd. Why didn't Jesus stick around? It seems that he had some unfinished business with the man that needed a more private moment. The man did not "know" who healed him, but Jesus "knew" the man, especially that he had been ill for a long time.

Later, Jesus finds the man. He also finds us.

## 'See, you are well'

John 5:14-15:

**<sup>14</sup>Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." <sup>15</sup>The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.**

That Jesus "found" the man indicates that he had been looking for him. Why does he seek out the man?

Jesus tells the man that he is now well. Or is he? Certainly, he's well in the sense that he can now walk. But there will come a time, even though he is now well, when he will no longer be able to walk. Some day, he will take his last step. Some day, he will speak his last word. Some day, he will draw his last breath. What then?

Jesus tells him, "Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." Before the man met Jesus, he had sinned in the sense that he lived irrespective of God's will. Living irrespective of God's will by no means necessarily results in suffering, but sometimes it does. In this case, Jesus discerns that the man's former condition was attributable to his sin. If, after having been healed by Jesus, he returns to his former ways, something worse than paralysis will befall him.

What's worse than thirty-eight years of paralysis? Facing God at the end of your days after having lived a life irrespective of his will: that's worse than paralysis. Later in John 5, Jesus says that a time is coming "when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). He also says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24).

The man's healing is incomplete—indeed, it is utterly

inconsequential—unless he believes in the one who healed him. Jesus has healed him so that he might believe and that, believing, he might resist evil and embrace holiness—so that he might be healed through and through. Jesus healed his body in order to heal his heart. The man must "see" that he is well, see what Jesus has done for him, so that he might "sin no more."

Does the man believe? Has he been healed through and through? Has he turned from his former ways? The early signs aren't good. First, when he was confronted by the opponents of Jesus, he blamed Jesus for commanding him to carry his mattress on the Sabbath. Then, even after Jesus sought him out to tell him to sin no more, he marches off—under the new strength that Jesus has given him, by the way—to inform on Jesus. The man seems more beholden to the Jewish authorities than to Jesus.

## Jesus heals hearts

Jesus did something for the man by the pool and then went looking for him. What has Jesus done for you? Has he in any way transcended your hopes? Whatever he's done for us, it's incomplete—it's utterly inconsequential—unless it leads to the deep healing that Jesus wants to work in our hearts, the kind of healing he wanted to work in the heart of the man by the pool.

Some bask in the glow of some blessing for a while and then forget all about God when the glow has faded, returning to their former ways. A man I knew had no interest in God until he was almost killed in an automobile accident. When I visited him in the hospital, I was surprised to see him so cheerful. His heart was open to God, he was thankful to be alive, and every trace of cynicism was gone from his words. However, by the time I visited him at his home, after he had been released, his heart had closed shut and the cynicism had returned. No matter what I tried, I couldn't pry open his heart, and he had no interest in talking about spiritual matters.

Jesus not only blesses us, he blesses us and then comes looking for us, because however he's blessed us, he wants to bless us in deeper ways. He wants to heal our hearts. Remember, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. What happens when Jesus blesses us? What is he doing when he transcends our hopes? He's showing us his heart! And that's how he heals our hearts: by showing us his heart. The apostle Paul says we are transformed into the likeness of Christ as we behold "the glory of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The glory of the Lord, Paul says, is seen in the face of Christ—the face of Christ, which portrays his heart (2 Corinthians 4:6). We see the glory of Christ—his greatness, his love—by seeing

what he has done for us: “See, you are well!” If we “see” that he transcends our hopes, then surely we can trust him with our hearts.

Obedience to the command to “sin no more” is only possible, then, as we see the glory of Christ—his greatness, his love—particularly in what he has done for us. Perception equals transformation. Jesus transcends our hopes in order to heal our hearts. Sometimes, he does so in obvious ways, by healing a broken body, for example. More often, he does so in subtle ways that could easily escape our notice if we’re not paying attention. Therefore, we must pay attention, keeping our eyes open for the artistry of the Lord. Listen to Frederick Buechner:

*Some moment happens in your life . . . that makes it worth having been born just to have happen: laughing with somebody till the tears run down your cheeks, waking up to the first snow, being in bed with somebody you love. . . . Whether you thank God for such a moment or thank your lucky stars, it is a moment that is trying to open up your whole life. If you turn your back on such a moment and hurry along to business as usual, it may lose you the ball game. If you throw your arms around such a moment and hug it like crazy, it may save your soul.*

Jesus, by healing the man by the pool, was trying to open up his whole life, but it looks as if he turned his back on the moment. He “went away.” Jesus, by transcending our hopes, is trying to open up our whole lives. Will we let him do so? Do you want to be healed?

## Heart to heart

When the Lord gave me a sun-drenched condominium in Capitola, not a weather-beaten shack in Half Moon Bay, what was he doing? He was showing me his heart. He was showing me his heart in a way that delighted my heart. You see, he knew my heart. He knew my un-prayed dream, which I had never shared with anyone. He knew—as only he could know—what would delight me, what would inspire me. He transcended my hopes. He was opening up my whole life. He transcended my hopes not just to do something nice for me; he transcended my hopes to show me his heart in order to heal my heart—in order that I may follow him, in order that I may resist evil and embrace holiness, and, finally, in order that I may sin no more.

I’ve tried to throw my arms around such moments by

writing short narratives about them. That’s what I was doing in Capitola, by the way. How will you throw your arms around such moments?

By transcending your hopes, Jesus has shown you his heart. Can you see? See, you are well! Sin no more.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>On the face of it, work in the Hebrew Scriptures, in connection with the Sabbath, constituted one’s customary employment, but by the time of Jesus, work was being interpreted by rabbis in broader ways.