

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
John 5:1-15
February 11, 2024

Do You Want To Get Well?

I once met a man at the Winter Housing Overflow Shelter who had been homeless for many years. He was very articulate, sober, a military veteran, and had family in the area. When his family offered to have him live with them, he said no. When the government offered him veteran housing, he said no. When I had asked him why he turned down these opportunities for permanent housing, he said that he preferred the freedom of living on the streets. Except for living in the men's shelter in the wintertime, he felt that the streets were safer, had no rules, and offered him a sense of community. To me, a housed person, seeing the conditions that people live in while on the streets, I was dumbfounded.

The truth is, folks, that even if we had affordable housing for every single person that was on the streets, there would still be some, like this man, who would say, "Thank you, but no thank you."

In our scripture story today, Jesus encountered a man who had been disabled for thirty-eight years. Now we aren't told specifically that he was homeless, but the chances were very high that he was. Or at the very least, he lived in a community with other disabled people which was common for that day. Apparently he believed that there was a cure for his disability since he had habit to come to this pool everyday for healing but never quite made it in. It was at that point that Jesus asked him a very pointed question for today, "Do you want to get well?"

Please join me as we read this story from John 5:1-15 and we consider that question for ourselves.

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. **2** Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. **3** Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. **[4]** **5** One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. **6** 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?"

7 "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."

8 Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." **9** At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, **10** and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”

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

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

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

14 Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” **15** The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Author Martin Copenhaver in *Jesus is the Answer, the 307 Questions Jesus Asked and The 3 He Answered* remarks, “It is not coincidence that the Great Physician is also the Great Questioner, because healing begins with questions.”¹ Healing begins with questions. Just as when we are sick and go to the doctor, they begin with asking a lot of questions. Questions aimed to help them properly diagnose what is going on in our bodies so that they can help us get better.

There are several things that struck me in today’s story that I want to lift up as we consider this question for ourselves. “Do we want to get well?” I want to begin by explaining some of the cultural context behind the Pool of Bethesda where this healing took place. Then we’ll consider the helpless feeling of being stuck that his man must have felt. We’ll see how Jesus understood what this man was going through and what he needed. We’ll also consider the healing partnership that Jesus invited him into. And finally we will address the issues of mental illness and substance abuse illness in our lives today.

The cultural context behind the Pool of Bethesda is quite fascinating. We are told that it was located near the Sheep Gate on the northside of the temple mount. The Sheep Gate was the gate through which the sacrificial lambs and goats were brought into the temple courts. It was also the place to where those who society did not want were abandoned...namely those who were believed back then to have been cursed by God, invalids as our text describes them today.

So all of this makes sense as to why the Pool of Bethesda was located here where many sick people were left. It also explains why Jesus, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world, entered here as well.

¹ Martin Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Answer, The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and The 3 He Answered* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 66.

When Jesus arrived at the Pool, he saw a man who had been lying at the poolside for thirty-eight years. So Jesus 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.”

There are a couple of things that we can take away from this man’s response. We can sense the depth of his isolation and abandonment. “I have no one to help me.” He was feeling helpless, unable to pull himself up by his bootstraps and get into the water himself. Also apparently timing was important. It was believed that the first person into the waters when they were stirred would be healed. And someone would always beat him to it.

But I wonder if there were something else going on here. We know that Jerusalem was being Hellenized at the time. In other words, Greek culture was infiltrating the Jewish language...hence Aramaic...the language Jesus spoke as well as the culture and religion. The Greco Roman god of healing was known as Asclepius. In the temples of Asclepius, there were pools much like the one of the Pool of Bethesda where invalids would be brought. It was believed that Asclepius would send his snakes into the water which when stirred provided certain healing qualities.

The Israel Institute of Biblical Studies suggests that the Pool of Bethesda might not have been a pool associated with the Jerusalem Temple but instead with a healing pool connected to the Asclepius shrine.² Bear with me for a moment, if the sick and the lame were excluded from temple worship on account of their infirmities, then maybe this Asclepius was believed to be their only hope.

Talk about feeling utterly hopeless. For thirty-eight years, this man surely had asked God to heal him. And when that didn’t work, he turned to a human idol made of stone. That’s just how desperate he was. Folks people today are just as desperate for answers and are turning to all sorts of pagan practices for hope. But none of that will save them. Only Jesus will.

Just when it seemed like another day would go by without having his prayer answered, God showed up, through Jesus.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t tell him to get into the water to be healed. He simply said, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!” And at once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.”

It is like in those moments of creation in Genesis, when God spoke and everything was created. In the same way, here, Jesus spoke and his words recreated this man, healed him of what prevented him from walking.

² <https://blog.israelbiblicalstudies.com/jewish-studies/bethesda-pool-jerusalem-shrine-asclepius/>

Ok. There are a couple things that Jesus shows us about the way that he works in concert with the Father and the Holy Spirit to bring about our healing.

First, it is always done with compassion. Somehow, Jesus just knew the years and years of trauma induced by this man's sickness...emotional, social, spiritual isolation from God and from others. It was so dehumanizing. But, Jesus saw him with compassion, like a fellow human being, unlike the way everyone else had seen him.

Second, we see how Jesus' question was "a way of inviting the man into a healing partnership."³ The man had to participate in the healing process. He would have to do his part. And then Jesus would do his. The man had to want to be healed hence Jesus' question "Do you truly want it?" The man also had to have faith that he could do what Jesus was commanding him to do. "GET OFF YOUR TUSH!" This was not suggestion. It was a command. "DO IT NOW! WALK!"

Third, this story shows us that Jesus does things his way and in his own time. It was the Sabbath. Jesus was not "supposed" to heal on the Sabbath. Just as the man was not supposed to carry his mat on the Sabbath because those things were "work." On the Sabbath, no one works.

But who are we to tell the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus, what he could and could not do on the day that he created?

Another thing that this shows us is that we cannot heal ourselves. Nor can we heal others. Only God can do that. That's why programs like Alcoholics Anonymous 12 steps teaches of yielding to a higher power.

So how then does this apply to our day and age?

According to the Center for Disease Control, "more than 1 in 5 U.S. adults live with a mental illness. Over 1 in 5 youth (ages 13-18) either currently or at some point during their life, have had a seriously debilitating mental illness. About 1 in 25 U.S. adults lives with more serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression."⁴

Similarly, according to the 2016 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 17.7 million American's need help for their substance abuse but do not get it. 16.9 million said that they do not need it, though their loved ones might argue differently. Out of the rest, more than half - 455,000 people believed they needed help but made no effort to get it."⁵

Why is that? Why don't people want help to get well?

Let me suggest a few barriers that might be in the way.

³ Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question*, 71.

⁴ <https://davidsusman.com/2015/06/11/8-reasons-why-people-dont-get-mental-health-treatment/>

⁵ <https://www.fortbehavioral.com/addiction-recovery-blog/5-reasons-people-dont-seek-help-for-addiction/>

One of the biggest barriers is fear and shame. People are afraid of what other people might think if they were to find out that they struggled with substance abuse or mental illness. They might be concerned about losing their jobs or worse yet, their families. Oftentimes, people think if they can just hide it from others, people won't find out.

But people will find out. Job performance will be affected. Bottles will be found. Inconsistencies will be evident. It is much better to let people know our struggles than having someone uncover the deceit and lies that are often done to cover them up. Did you know that The Family Leave Act guarantees a person's job should they need to take 12 weeks off for treatment?

Folks. Mental illness is a disease. Substance abuse is a disease. Substances like alcohol, drugs, and pornography. These addictions are diseases. We don't feel shame when we get cancer or catch a cold. Likewise, we should not feel shame if our brains become sick or we become unable to stop ourselves from using substances.

Another barrier might be that people are just not ready to get well. Perhaps they are not ready to stop using a particular substance or they simply do not want to acknowledge that they were having mental health problems to begin with. Denial is a state of mind that prevents us from getting the help that we desperately need.

Which leads into the next barrier which is a lack of insight and self-awareness. Someone who says, "I'm not sick" or "I don't have a problem," when others around them are saying that they do is an alarm that indicates a lack of insight and awareness. People may try to dismiss or minimize their issues saying "why is everyone getting so stressed out about this?" or "my problems aren't that bad," or "you're making this into a bigger deal than it is." Is it?

Another barrier is not knowing where to get help. The truth is that there are a plethora of resources out there. Some 14,000 addiction treatments centers. The first step is to talk with someone you trust. Start with your spouse, your parent, or your doctor. You can also talk with a pastor, a counselor, or a friend. Kids should talk with a trusted adult, a youth leader, a teacher, or a coach. Friends at your young age mean well, but they could actually become barriers to getting the real help that you need.

I am not a licensed therapist, nor am I a substance abuse counselor, but I can partner with you and refer you to someone who is. Someone who is professionally trained to work with people who struggle with mental illnesses or substance abuse. I can also help you get connected to support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (which meets here in our building on Monday nights at 7:00pm), Celebrate Recovery (which meets at the church across the street), ALANON support groups for people who have loved ones struggling with addiction, or the National Alliance

on Mental Illness (NAMI) which is a support group for family members of people diagnosed with mental illness.

These support groups are so important because another barrier to getting better is that sense of having to go at it alone. We are not alone. Others have walked this journey much longer than we have. And they can be a support and help, knowing that we can make it through it.

Another barrier is affordability. Some treatment is very costly. It is best to start with finding out from your insurance what programs are covered. Work with that list first. And then narrow it down to what program works best for your needs. There are people who work full time solely on helping people figure out how to afford the treatment that is needed.

And finally, a barrier that may prevent people from taking steps toward wellness could be feelings of inadequacy or failure. They believe that they should be able to handle things on their own without assistance and that they must be weak or inferior if they have to ask for help. Some may also become so demoralized by their issues that they believe “nothing will ever help me” or “They’ll never get better.”

All of these are lies from the enemy that cause us to stay bound and not experience the freedom God intends for us.

So what if we are not the one with a problem, what should we do?

The first thing is be brave enough to confront the problem. We say, “Houston we have a problem here.” But do it with love. Remember how Jesus first saw the struggling person and had compassion on them.

The second thing is show concern. Be a listening ear, ask questions, and encourage people to pray. Maybe even offer to go with them to the doctor or to support groups.

And finally realize that the power to change our loved one is not in our control. God alone, our higher power, through Jesus Christ, intervenes on behalf of our loved one. What we can control is our ability to pray for change.

If we are the one struggling with mental illness or substance abuse, Jesus asks us, “Do you want to get well?”

If we are walking with someone struggling with mental illness or substance abuse, Jesus asks us as well, “Do you want to get well?”

If so, then join Jesus, pick up your mat, and walk!

One final note that I would like to add today is just like this man in our story today was not defined by his disability, neither are we defined by our mental illness or our substance abuse. We are so much more. We are beloved children of God. Thanks be to God! Amen!