

FAITH HEALING: BECOMING WHOLE

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John 5:1-18

Today, we encounter a memorable story of Jesus healing a paralyzed man. This story takes place in Jerusalem during the days of a religious festival. Jesus is one of the many pilgrims who has traveled to Jerusalem for this observance.

In Jerusalem, near the temple there was a pool. Imagine a large, public swimming pool with porticos or covered porches enclosing it on each side. This pool was fed by a spring. And the name of this particular pool was Beth-zatha, which in Hebrew means House of Mercy. The purpose of this pool was for Jews to perform acts of ritual cleansing. This pool was likely the first stop for the pilgrims coming into the city before going to the temple to worship.

Because of the presence of a large number of pilgrims, the pool also attracted *the blind, lame, and paralyzed* who gathered to beg from the magnanimous visitors. But there is another reason this pool attracted the sick and disabled. The pool possessed legendary healing qualities. As we understand it, the spring feeding the pool occasionally would bubble. Legend said this happened because an angel was stirring the water. The first person into the water after the angel stirred it would be healed of whatever afflicted them. That was the legend.

The gospel story we read today focuses on one person at that pool—a man with some condition that prevented him from walking. He had suffered in that way for 38 years—essentially, his entire life. Jesus recognizes that this man has been at the pool for quite a long while—years maybe—and Jesus approaches him asking, *Do you want to be made well?* Instead of answering ‘yes,’ the man proceeds to tell Jesus why it is that he can never get to the pool ahead of everyone else. Someone always beats him there. He has no one to help him.

This man’s response to Jesus’ question should not be surprising. He is hostage to a broken system and unable to contemplate healing. He could never imagine that this man asking this question actually possessed the power to make him well. For the man, the only path to healing involved this randomly bubbling pool.

Imagine that you were to visit a homeless encampment, and you go up to one of the folks and say, “Would you like a house of your own?” They would never consider that you had a house to give them. Who has a house to give away? Odds are they’re going to explain to you why they don’t have a house already and they will tell you how they almost had the money but then it got stolen, or lost, or something else happened. The man at the pool is like this. He has suffered his condition for so long that it is impossible for him to imagine not being this way. It is also impossible to imagine that anyone would help him.

Jesus does not argue with the man but simply says, *Stand up, take your mat and walk.* The man is made well, and he does as Jesus commands.

As with all healing stories in the gospels, there is more going on than is first apparent. For one thing, when Jesus asks the man if he wants to be *made well*, we assume Jesus is asking if the man desires to be healed of his condition. We are familiar with Jesus' power. But the word for *well* holds a range of meanings. It can be translated as *well* or *whole* (as some of your Bibles may have it). It can mean being balanced, being right with the world. If we know Jesus, then we know that he is asking more. He is asking, *Do you want to be made whole? Do you want to be right with the world?* There is a huge difference in being made well and being made whole. I can be well on the outside but still be broken on the inside.

I remember the words of my counseling professor. He was discussing people with addictions. He said you can cure a person of their addiction, but that doesn't erase all their problems. We can be made well but still be broken. And we can be like the man at the pool. When Jesus says *Do you want to be made whole*, it can be difficult to comprehend being whole.

I believe we can take this story a bit further. I want to challenge you to see this story as more than a simple story of healing. I want to challenge you to see this as a story of justice.

For many people, justice means retribution—you hurt me, so therefore justice demands that I get to hurt you back. But justice, as we find in our holy scripture, is more than that. Justice means balance; it is equity. Justice is a level playing field where all people have the same opportunity to become whole as God's people, where all are loved by God and experience that love equally. When some are pushed down, held back, and denied opportunity, then justice is absent. Our God is a God who embraces justice.

As we read in the book of Isaiah, *The Lord will rise up to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice* (Isaiah 30:18). The man at the pool suffered the injustices of society. I mean, he had the worst healthcare plan ever. A just system would have given him the opportunity to get to the pool instead of suffering the mad dash of the afflicted—a race he was destined to lose. But Jesus arrives and injects justice into the system and brings healing to the man. With a word Jesus disrupts the cycle of injustice.

This past summer, our nation witnessed a wave of protests. In every state, people came together to raise their voices in a cry for justice. The protests were sparked by the death of one man. But the protests were about so much more than that. That death was simply a catalyst. The protests were a demand for justice—the need to level the playing field and allow each person, despite their gender, race, skin color, or sexual orientation to be granted the freedom to become whole. The

protests were designed to bring change to a system which holds some people back for no other reason than that they are different.

This winter, several of us from this church have been part of a group of Wilson County congregations who get together to discuss matters of race. Recently, one of the black pastors shared a personal experience that is common to people of color. However, instead of telling you his story, I want to offer it as a sort of case study.

Imagine that you are young and recently married. You and your spouse have good jobs. You have saved up money and decided it is time to purchase a home. We all know that in this country owning a house is one of the most reliable means of building wealth. You located a newly constructed home on a half-acre of land in a new subdivision. You go to the bank for financing and walk out with a mortgage interest rate of 4.30%.

You have a friend at work with the same job as you, about the same age, and also recently married. Your friend and their spouse are looking to buy a house and they choose the house next door to the one you've just bought. They go to the bank to apply for a loan but because they are African American the bank considers them a higher risk and offers them a mortgage not at 4.3% but at 4.62%.

The difference in mortgage rates seems insignificant but it will have a huge impact on your two families. Each year, your friend will pay \$700 more in interest payments.¹ Your wealth will grow faster. You will have more discretionary cash. When you have children, you will be able to offer your children better educational experiences than your neighbor. When you die, your children will inherit more money thus benefitting them even further. All of this because of a simple difference in mortgage rates because of skin color. The effects of this act will span generations.

This is the price of systemic racism. When the system holds some back by creating inequitable burdens it prevents them from becoming whole. When some are held back, all are held back. We find systemic injustice not just with interest rates, but also in health care, the judicial system, education, voting rights, employment, and more. It's the entire system. We can excuse this disparity by saying that if these people just worked harder they would catch up. No. The system is rigged against them; no matter how hard they work, they cannot catch up.

When we look back at the story of the Pool of Beth-zatha, we realize the man at the pool need not have suffered as he did. He should not have even needed Jesus. All he required was for someone to show some mercy and help him—to sit with him until the pool bubbled, to treat him as fully human. You would think that with the thousands of pilgrims on their way to worship passing through the place called

¹ <https://www.inquirer.com/real-estate/housing/systemic-racism-black-homeowners-mortgage-lending-20201114.html>

House of Mercy, that someone would take time to help. All those pilgrims and they are too busy being religious to demonstrate compassion.

Today is they Fourth Sunday in the Season of Lent. Lent is a forty-day journey from brokenness to healing. This year, I am preaching this series on healing and asking what we can learn from these accounts and how that might help us along on our journey. And I hope we can learn many things from this story, but most of all, that on our journey we need to stop and help others. It is not just about us. It is about the system. For us as followers of Christ, we should be the ones showing mercy. We should be the ones breaking the cycles of injustice. After all, we have felt Jesus' power to heal, and we should respond in kind with acts of compassion, to take the time, to lift up those who have been pushed down, to obliterate the forces of injustice, and to help the people around us become whole. For as we help them become whole, we become more whole ourselves and the doors of the kingdom become open to us.

Later on, Jesus found the man in the temple, and he told the man that he had been made well and that he should go forth and not sin anymore. Jesus had taken his sins from him. We are also the beneficiaries of Christ's healing and we should go out and, like the man, in this state of being healed we should sin no more. We should act as if we are whole. We should help those around us. We should journey toward the cross as one.

Amen.