

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 26th 2019
St. John's Lutheran Church: Summit, NJ
John 5:1-9 "Living the Questions"

I don't know whether you've ever paid much attention to this biblical reality, but Jesus asked a lot of questions. Sometimes they were simple questions like, "Children do you have any fish?" or "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" or, "Why are you sleeping?" But sometimes they were in-your-face sort of questions. These were questions like when Jesus, after his resurrection, asked Peter 3 times (which was exactly the number of times Peter had denied knowing him), "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Or when the disciples were cowering in fear and Jesus asked them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" Or even more pointedly to his sometimes-hard-headed disciples, "How much longer must I put up with you?"

These were tough questions to be sure. But the question he asks in today's gospel lesson is really a hard one. It's one that resonates a lot with me, and maybe it does with you too. Jesus was in Jerusalem, walking near a pool by the Sheep's Gate. In the five entrances to the pool, people who are chronically sick and disabled lie waiting, because rumor has it that an angel visits the pool from time to time and stirs up the water. If you're lucky enough to be in the pool when this happens, you get healed.

While visiting what one writer has called, an "outdoor nursing home", Jesus sees a man who has been lying by this pool for a long time --- thirty-eight years to be exact, and he approaches him with a question. There are no introductions like a new doctor might do. "Hi, I'm Jesus of Nazareth. What's your name?" There's no small talk, no teaching. Just a question, a seemingly easy question to answer, but one that, if taken seriously calls for deeper reflection. "Do you want to be made well?"

Sometimes when I think about this text, I imagine a few different responses to Jesus' question.

“What do you mean, “*Do I want to be made well?*” Do you think I’d be lying by this pool for 38 years if I didn’t?” Or, I might say, “No mister. I’m just lying by this pool to get a sun tan.” Or, feeling sorry for myself I just might say, “Please go away and leave me alone.”

But this unnamed man doesn’t say either “Yes” or “No”. Instead, he makes an excuse, or at the least tries to explain why he’s been lying around that pool and begging (which he most likely did) for 38 years. He says, “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.” “I’ve tried mister, but people keep bumping me out of the way. I can’t do it on my own and people are so mean and selfish.”

Maybe it’s just me, but the question that Jesus asks this man makes me feel uncomfortable, because it hits too close to home. How would *you* feel if you were sick or disabled for almost four decades, and a stranger came along one day and asked if you wanted to get better? Is he implying that your ongoing sickness is partially your fault? That somehow, in the deep recesses of your heart or mind, maybe even unknown to you, that you’re so stuck in your broken and paralyzed reality, that you can’t imagine your life any other way? “Do you want to be made well?”

What a hard question, and I can definitely identify with the man’s response. Jesus’ question stings because I know what it’s like to say that I want out, that I want to be released from the burdens that keep me weighed down literally and figuratively... to say that I want to be healed and not quite mean it. I know what it’s like to cling to brokenness because it’s familiar; to self-sabotage and then make excuses for it. Maybe you do too.

Folks who avoid going to 12 step programs until they bottom out, would probably give these kinds of answers too. “Look, I’m okay and I don’t really drink that much.” Or, “I’m not really an addict; I can stop doing drugs whenever I want to.” Or, “I’m not the one with the anger issues, it’s him or her.”

Truth be told, it's easy to get stuck and stay stuck in old habits and patterns of being. And once you're stuck, you're likely going to stay stuck until somehow there's an intervention.

Maybe it's when your health takes a turn for the worse and you finally decide to do something about it. Or it could be that a family member or friend finally gets up the gumption to tell you that your addiction to work, food, drugs, or even self-pity is ruining your relationships and it's killing you. And I think that's what Jesus is doing with and for this man.

Now please don't get me wrong. Jesus isn't "blaming the victim" in this story. All the Gospels make it clear that Jesus had deep compassion for the sick and those who were marginalized and outcast. He never tells a sick person that his or her illness is their own fault. In fact, he often corrects the cultural misunderstanding about disease and disability that says people who are sick must have sinned. No, I think Jesus is doing something different here.

When he looks at this man who has been languishing by the pool for thirty-eight years, he sees more than sickness. He sees defeat; mental and spiritual stagnation. He sees a man whose hope has atrophied so much that he can't even articulate what he wants for his body, his soul, or his future. He sees a beloved child of God who is stuck.

I'm wondering: Where are you stuck this morning? Has Jesus ever asked you if you want to be made well? Do we want to be healed from those behaviors and ways of "stinking thinking" that paralyze, hurt and diminish us? Do we want to stand up in our spirits and be healed? Well if we do, here's some good news for us.

Just as Jesus saw the man by the pool in Bethzatha, he sees you and me today. There were many other blind, paralyzed, and sick folks lying by that pool. But Jesus *saw this* man. He reached out to him and asked him that pointed and poignant question.

Notice that the man never asks for healing. In fact, he may not and probably *does not* even know who Jesus is. Jesus doesn't say anything about his faith or lack thereof as he often does when he performs a healing miracle. He doesn't tell the man, "Your faith has made you well," because that wouldn't be true. He doesn't dwell on the man's past or dredge up how much of his life has been wasted lying by this pool. Jesus doesn't even heal the man on the terms he understands -- by helping him into the pool when the angel stirs the water. He simply tells the man to get up and walk. Immediately the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

What a question --- "Do you want to be made well?" For me, the question is hard because it's pretty amazing to think that God cares about what I want and even more, what I need. It's both awesome and scary to think that my healing and your healing, and indeed the healing of the whole world is what God longs for. And it's hurtful to think that for whatever reason, I don't always want what God and other loved ones want for me.

But if we're willing to sit with the uncomfortable truths of this story, maybe we can begin to realize on a deeper level that like the man in today's gospel, God really does want us, all of us, to be made well. He wants us to walk again, to walk into new life. To thrive again. To be delivered from the paralysis of our past and whatever baggage and fears that we keep bringing into the future. Jesus wants us to say, "Yes." Yes. Period. And to mean it. Today beloved, we're called to live the question: "Do you want to be made well?" Then stand up, take up whatever your mat is, and walk. Amen.

Pastor Gladys G. Moore