

May 9, 2010

John 5:1-9

1 After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

2 Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. 3 In these lay many invalids--blind, lame, and paralyzed waiting for the stirring of the water; [4] for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had. 5 One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" 7 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 making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." 9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

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Have you ever heard the expression that the only stupid question is the one that isn't asked? When I was an undergrad Eastern, I had an English teacher; her name was Hazel Christman, who told the class that ten per cent of our grade depended on class participation. So I participated. In fact I had my hand up so often and asked so many questions that I managed first to make a lie out of that statement about stupid questions. And second I'm positive that I also convinced Hazel that I hadn't read the material because if I had, I wouldn't have asked so many stupid questions. But I want to give myself a little credit. Maybe - you know-- unconsciously I was trying to be the exception that proved the rule. But because it was--and I was unconscious, I was not aware of it at the time.

John's Gospel told us that the man lying beside the pool at Bethesda had been ill for 38 years and so you can imagine his reaction to Jesus' question and how it was similar to some of mine in Miss Christman's Survey of World Literature class. After hearing the fellow's sad story, Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be made well?"

We mustn't blame the man who had been sick for such a long time if he had failed to offer a hasty response, a quick yes or a no. What I suspect might have happened is that there was a long pause, during which he considered possible answers to what must have seemed to him to be the stupidest question he had ever heard. It must have taken every ounce of self control not to respond with sarcasm. I mean he could almost have taken that on the road, done a stand up routine on the comedy club circuit.

"Do I want to be made well? No, not really, actually I kind of like sitting here. My friends are all here. I get a kick out of the way that they all feel sorry for me when they get to the pool before I do and are healed of their illnesses and afflictions.

But he had been there for awhile. He was probably beyond sarcasm. In fact he was so desperate that he probably just told Jesus like it was. “Do I want to be made well? Well I’ve been paralyzed for quite awhile. The simplest tasks for you and your pals are impossible for me to do without help, and help isn’t always available.”

“It’s made for some embarrassing moments, even though there was nothing I could do about it, and the fault was not mine. So do I want to be made well? Why yes Jesus, I think that’s a pretty safe assumption!” OK maybe just a little sarcasm...

But it wasn’t a stupid question at all, and not just because John has placed it in the mind and on the lips of Jesus. It was the perfect question, deceptive because it was so obvious, and because it struck right at the heart of the matter. And because it is such a good question I thought I’d try an experiment. Are you ready for this? You know what I’m going to do, right? OK, ready?

Do you want to be made well?

Talk about stupid questions. This place bears no similarity to the porticos near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. Where’s the pool of Bethesda? Where are all the sick people awaiting the magic angel?

“Do you want to be made well?”

You could ask me the same question but I would reply, “Absolutely!” And I would add, “And not just me, but all of you as well and Phyllis and Edie and Inky, and Evelyn and Ruth and Charlotte, and David as well—in fact all of those we are praying for and many whom we are not..

Absolutely indeed, if we are talking about the pain and inconvenience of a physical illness or disability, plus all of the attention that, truth to be told, we’d rather be lavishing on somebody else. But the question, “Do you want to be made well?” moves beyond the mere physical and spreads into the emotional and spiritual realms of our lives.

Isn’t that just like Jesus to stretch a simple question into something that requires a real complicated answer? I’m sorry but we have to do it this way because if you’re not suffering from a physical ailment or disability just now, your answer might end with something like, “I don’t need to be made well, I feel just fine, but thanks for asking.”

Now the man at Bethesda chose not to answer directly, but chose instead to tell Jesus a sad story, but one which made sense. Because of his infirmity he was unable to get into the waters fast enough for them to do him any good. He’s a lot like us, isn’t he? In those parts of our lives that could use a little healing we’ve got some excellent reasons for why we aren’t healed.

All of this puts me in mind of a book that Dr. Eric Berne wrote in 1964 called *Games People Play*.

Maybe he got the idea from the Joe South song of the same name, or maybe it was vice versa. Berne was a psychiatrist who wanted to make psychology more accessible to people who had not been to medical school. He defined a game as “an ongoing series of complementary ulterior transactions progressing to a well-defined, predictable outcome.” Got it?

Descriptively, it is a recurring set of actions both verbal and non-verbal with a hidden motivation or gimmick, a hook if you will. Let me give you an example. One of the games that Berne’s described is called “Yes but...” You’ve played it, I’ve played it maybe you have even been the star. Let’s say we’re at a party standing chatting with a group of people. The person doing the talking has a problem. Maybe he’s going to lose his job, maybe her marriage is in trouble.

Remember, the aim of the person who introduced the game is to gain some kind of payoff - usually some kind of emotional reward. The initial moves are presented in such away that they maximize the probability of this happening.

Let’s use the guy facing the job loss. We’ll call him Mr. Blue. All of a sudden Blue is bombarded with helpful suggestions. “If you want to keep your job you have to spend more time at the office.” Brown suggests.

Blue replies, “Yes, but I’m already there for 12 hours a day, and I’ve got a family.” Red says, “Maybe you should dress better, you know, the look of success.”

Blue answers, “Yes but, I bought three new suits last month and nobody seems to notice, plus my credit card debt is starting to pile up.” Green offers, “You should get a Blackberry to keep track of your schedule and appointments.”

“Yes but, I’ve been using a Blackberry for six months...” You get the idea. The fact is, Mr. Blue has been worrying about his problem for months without being able to solve it. I assure you that if Blue has any brains at all, he’s *already* thought of every possible suggestion that you or anybody else will come up with in the space of five minutes after he presented his problem.

So what’s the payoff? Nobody can solve his problem. Eventually everybody wanders off and feels bad for Mr. Blue. But let’s not feel too bad for him, because Blue won the game. His payoff was that nobody could solve his problem; that his problem was worse than any of the others, and finally there’s nothing he can do except to let nature and the politics of the corporation to take their course.

I think Jesus didn’t know much about a game called “Yes, but...” I think it’s a game we ought not play, mostly because its pretty easy to win at it, and Jesus isn’t always around to overcome our sad stories. “Do you want to be made well?” gets right to it; no fooling around. No games.

Could it be that we are all the man sitting beside the magic pool? Maybe we’ve been

there for five or ten, or thirty-eight years; maybe longer. Could it be that there's a part of our lives that want to tell the Lord Jesus, that, "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." Could it be that we all have a version of that story we tell Jesus?

And wouldn't it be great if Jesus just looked right through us and said, "Pick up your mat and walk." What would that look like? Because I have a feeling that more or less, we may a lot like Mr. Blue. We have all the answers to keep us from wellness and none about how to become well. But it all returns to Jesus' question which we must face honestly, and answer honestly, because we know what we must do and maybe the better question is not if we want to be made well, but are we willing to accept the consequences of being made well; because as long as there is something wrong with us, we have lots of reasons to keep us from succeeding, but we know what we must do. So it becomes a question of will.

Are we willing?