

## John 5:1-9

I think by now you have heard enough Gospel readings to know that Jesus asks in-your-face questions. “Do you love me?” “Why are you so afraid?” “Are you also going to leave?” “How long shall I put up with you?” “Do you still not understand?”

But the question he asks in this week’s Gospel might be the most jarring of all. The setting in which he asks it is Jerusalem, near a pool by the Sheep’s Gate. In the five porticoes by the pool, the chronically sick and disabled of the city are waiting. Tradition has it that an angel visits the pool at random times, stirring up the water, and giving it healing properties. The first person to step into the pool after the angel disturbs it, receives healing.

In our story, Jesus visits this area and finds a man lying by the pool who has been sick for 38 years, and approaches him with a question. No introductions. No small talk. No sermon. Just a question: “Do you want to be made well?”

Is it just me, or is this an uncomfortable question? How would you feel if you were sick for 38 years, and a stranger came along one day and asked if you really wanted to get better?

Implying that your ongoing sickness was at least partially your fault. Implying that you were benefiting, consciously or unconsciously, from remaining sick. Implying that you were somehow invested in your brokenness, that you had stakes in it, that your identity was so wrapped up in your infirmity, weakness, or defeat, you couldn’t imagine your life without your illness.

How would you feel? How would you respond? Would you hear pure insult in the question? Or would you hear a faint echo of the truth? The kind of truth that hurts?

Let me be clear. I don’t believe that Jesus is “blaming the victim” in this story. We know of his deep compassion for the sick and the disabled. Not once in Scripture does he respond to pain

or illness with contempt, mockery, or condescension. Not once does he tell a sick person that her illness is her own fault. In fact, he corrects that cultural misunderstanding about disease and disability at every opportunity.

All of that to say: I trust Jesus's heart and his motives enough to take his question in this Gospel story at face value. When he looks at the man who has been wasting away by the pool for 38 years, he sees more than sickness. He sees defeat. He sees resignation. He sees a man whose hope has dwindled. A man whose imagination has withered to such a point that he can't even say what he wants for his body, his soul, or his future.

Do you want to be made well?

Last week I attended the inaugural Justice Pilgrimage sponsored by the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing in the Diocese of Atlanta. We had a representative there from each of the Dioceses in Province IV, so a group of 20 priests and deacons from the southeast part of the United States. I represented our diocese. Our host was Dr. Catherine Meeks. Many of you may know Dr. Meeks from past Diocesan Conventions or have read her book, [Living into God's Dream](#). The week started last Sunday with a welcome from the Bishop of Atlanta, Rob Wright, and then we spent two very intensive days at the Center, listening and talking on race and healing issues. On days three and four, we travelled by bus first to Savannah and then to Charleston. I have to say I'll never see those cities quite the same now. We ended our time together on Friday with a presentation on Howard Thurman and his impact on the Civil Rights movement and peaceful resistance.

I was not originally chosen by Bishop Smith to attend this event. He originally chose the priest-in-charge of St. Augustine's, Mo. Josie Rose, to attend. To his mind, and clearly to some other bishop's minds, the right person for this Justice Pilgrimage was a priest already engaged in

racial healing issues. St. Augustine's has spent a good deal of time retracing their past and hearing, and recording, stories from their elders. When Mo. Rose got shingles and it was clear she could not attend, Bishop Smith called me into his office and asked who he should send instead. I mentioned a few names but none seemed right, so finally I said, "you need to send me." It turns out the right person for this pilgrimage was not a person already engaged in racial healing issues; it was a person on the cusp of this. As part of this event, each participant is 'asked'...I'm saying 'asked' in quotes because Dr. Meeks can be very insistent...to implement a carefully thought out 6-month plan of action for their parish focused on racial healing. All of us will then return to the Center in Atlanta to share our experiences.

One of Dr. Meeks questions to us was, "Do we want to be made well?" I don't have to stand up here and get political in any way to say that there are major disparities between blacks and whites in our country and that this leads our country to illness. In the Gospel, did you notice that the man doesn't answer Jesus's question, "Do you want to be made well?" Jesus asks, and the man doesn't say "yes." Isn't that odd? After 38 years of intense suffering, he doesn't say yes! Instead, he explains why he has not made it into the pool. He invites pity, he hems and haws, he avoids answering the question Jesus actually asks, which isn't a question about the man's circumstances at all, but a question about his heart and his identity. Do we want to be made well?

Now if there's anything more amazing in this Gospel story than Jesus's question, it's what happens after he asks it. "Stand up, take your mat and walk," Jesus tells the man. And the man does exactly that. "At once," John tells us, "the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk."

Notice that the man never asks for healing. There's no indication in the story that he even knows who Jesus is. Notice that Jesus makes no reference to belief, as he often does when he

performs a healing miracle. He doesn't tell the man, "Your faith has made you well," because that would be a lie. Notice that Jesus doesn't dwell on the man's past; he doesn't dredge up the loss and waste of the 38 years the man can't get back. And notice that he doesn't heal the man on the man's terms — by helping him into the pool when the angel stirs the water. Jesus simply tells the man to get up and walk. And the man does.

What I take away from this story is that Jesus is always and everywhere in the business of making new and making well. His desire to heal is intrinsic to his character — it doesn't depend on me. In other words, "Do you want to be made well?" is a question he will never stop asking, because his heart's desire is for healing and wholeness.

Do we want to be made well?

I hope and expect that over these next 6 months, as we here at St. Thomas enter into some intentional spiritual formation around racial healing, that especially those of us working directly with people of color in schools, food pantries, health clinics, and on Benison Farm, will take up our mats and attend these offerings, whatever they may be, so that we may be made well and may start healing our country. Amen.