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John 5:1-9

TAKE YOUR PICK

On the surface, it looks like a pretty ordinary healing story. Jesus sees a paralyzed man and heals him. But when looking into this story, I found that there were two competing interpretations of the underlying message of this passage. And both interpretations were compelling. So, I will share both of these interpretations with you today, and you can take your pick.

The setting of our story is the city of Jerusalem at a special pool where the chronically sick, disabled, and blind gathered to bathe in the healing waters. The traditional belief of that community was that an angel of God would visit the pool at random times and stir up the water, giving it healing properties. The first person to step into the pool after it was stirred up would receive healing.

Jesus visits this gathering of the infirmed and finds a man who has been lying by the pool for 38 years. We gather from the story that the man is paralyzed or lame or has some kind of mobility issue. Apparently, every time the waters get stirred up, people start pushing and shoving to get into the water first, and this man gets shoved out of the way and never makes it in time.

Jesus asks this man, "Do you want to be healed?" and the man explains why it is he hasn't been able to reach the healing waters. And then Jesus says to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk. And the man is healed.

One interpretation of this story focuses on the plight of this disabled man. Thirty eight years he waited to be healed. Thirty eight years he tried to work within the system that was

available to him, only to be pushed aside, ignored, forgotten, and left to suffer. The story gets us to consider all those today who face a similar situation. Who are those left waiting for healing? Who are those left waiting for justice and denied well-being? Who are those for whom the system does not work?

In 2018, the United Nations released a report on the state of poverty in the United States. It reported that 40 million Americans live in poverty, 18.5 million live in extreme poverty, and that 5.3 million Americans live in third world conditions of absolute poverty. Those of us who live in comfort can easily adhere to the prevailing belief that the system is the solution, believing that if you just follow the rules of the system, then you will succeed. Those invalids gathered around that healing pool in Jerusalem had also been taught to trust in the system, that this was the system that would grant them healing. But the system left vast numbers in suffering. And here in our nation, there are millions of people waiting for healing and relief, millions of people for whom the system is not working, who have been overlooked, pushed aside, and ignored.

Maybe this story speaks directly to you, and your own need for healing--whether that is healing for your body, your spirit, your attitudes, or behaviors. Maybe you or a loved one has been waiting for some kind of wholeness. And you know what it is like to grow weary, and discouraged, and to feel that the system is not working.

Our story today from John's gospel tells us that Jesus went to Jerusalem for a religious festival. But instead of heading to the Temple to worship, instead of seeking the company of those at the Temple which was the center of social and religious power, Jesus goes to what would be the equivalent of a crowded city hospital--to a place where no one had power. Jesus goes to that pool where it was dank, and smelly, and filled with diseased and disabled, all those people society wanted to ignore, all those people waiting for a miracle. And Jesus sees. And

Jesus cares. And Jesus heals. That is the comfort we can find in this story: that Jesus sees, that Jesus cares, that Jesus heals. And that is also the charge we have from this story: for us, Jesus' followers, to also see, to also care, to also heal. There are so many people in need of wholeness, who are kept at arm's length and excluded or ignored. Wholeness is not only a matter of the body but also of the spirit. People cannot be whole if they are denied acceptance or the resources that will enable them to know a meaningful life. For a long time in our country, disabled people who could not manage stairs were excluded from so much of regular life because they could not access buildings and schools and businesses. But with effort and advocacy, laws changed. And buildings became more accessible, and greater wholeness was offered to people once excluded.

One interpretation of this passage is that it reveals how Christ offers healing to those long overlooked, for those the system has failed, and then recognize his call to us to follow him in helping others know greater wholeness.

But there is also another interpretation of this passage. When Jesus sees the man lying beside the pool of water, he sees more than just sickness. He sees defeat. He sees hopelessness. He sees resignation. And we get a clue that maybe there is more than just a physical ailment at work when Jesus asks the man an crucial question: "Do you want to be made well?" Do you *want* to be made well? And do you remember how the man responds? After 38 years of suffering we might expect him to shout out, "yes!" But instead he explains why it is that for 38 years he has not been able to get down into the water. "I have no one to put me in the pool," highlighting his scarcity of resources, and states how "others step in front of me," pointing to the unfairness of the world.

It is a crucial question Jesus asks the man. Do you *want* to be made well? Now I also want to be clear that Jesus is *not* seeking to blame the victim. There is no place in scripture

where Jesus blames people who are ill or sick or disabled. In fact, just the opposite. Jesus repeatedly critiques the prevailing religious and social beliefs of his day that blamed the sick and disabled and the poor for their predicaments. Jesus is not blaming this man for the hardship and suffering he has endured. But it is possible that in looking at this man Jesus saw someone whose body not only had atrophied but whose imagination for himself had also atrophied. After so many years of suffering, and hardship, and struggle, he had become resigned to his condition in life. It was what was familiar.

Do you *want* to be made well? What if Jesus asked us that question? Do you *want* to be made well. We can say we want healing, that we want to be released from a burden of the mind or body or spirit, and also at the same time not completely mean it. Sometimes we become invested in our own brokenness. It is identity we have grown used to. And our own imaginations for who we could be and what God might do with us atrophies.

This can be true not only for individuals but for communities. We might consider the ways that the Christian churches in the western world are invested in our own brokenness. Society has changed and the health of vast numbers of churches are in decline. And yet we're still lying on our pallets, waiting for a miracle. Our imaginations have atrophied. We cling to old ways of being church. We keep our buildings safe and tidy. We hold fast to our rituals and traditions. Jesus asks us, "Do you *want* to be made well?" Well, maybe. Maybe not.

Perhaps this story from John's gospel highlights the ways we cling to brokenness rather than welcome the new life Christ offers us.

So, there you have it. Take your pick as to which sermon addresses this biblical story: the plight of the overlooked or the investment we have in our brokenness. On the other hand, maybe we don't have to pick. Maybe it is both. Is it not very likely that that prolonged human

suffering leads to a kind of brokenness that may take years, decades, or even generations to overcome? Is it not possible that with prolonged human suffering, imaginations do atrophy to the point that individuals and communities cannot envision anything different? And that in the end, we all need the love of Christ to help us both individually as well as collectively, find the path to the healing waters of life.

There is a third interpretation of this story as well. Some see this story as a tale of radical grace. For notice, the paralyzed man never sought Jesus out for healing. Notice that he was not healed because of his faithfulness or because of his great belief. Jesus does not say to him as he sometimes said to others, "Go, your faith has made you well." We hear none of that in this story. There was no display of faith. And yet, the man was healed nevertheless. Jesus saw his need. And Jesus healed him. And so maybe, maybe what this story is really about is God--that it is a tale about the undeserved, unmerited grace of God for you and me, that it is fundamentally about a God who desires for us all to know wholeness.