

The Sixth Sunday of Easter - May 26, 2019

“*The Wellsprings of Healing*” - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Psalm 67; Revelation 22:10, 22:1-5; John 5:1-13

During one of the high holidays of the Jewish tradition, on the most sacred day of the week for the Jewish people, Jesus walks into one of the most holy temples in the Roman pantheon. There he performs his third hands-on miracle and heals an invalid.

The simple approach to this story is to read this as just another healing by Jesus. Once we dig just a little deeper, though, this story becomes a profound statement on creation, the power of God, and how we approach the sacred, the beautiful and the love of God and Christ.

Let's begin with the Pool of Bethesda itself. For many years, millenia even, it was believed that John made up this story to prove the point of Jesus' healing power. But in 1964, an archaeologist discovered a divided pool which matched the description in the Gospel of John. Further investigation revealed details that make it clear John knew exactly what he was talking about with the Pool of Bethesda.

The Pool at Bethesda was one of about 400 *asclepieions* in the Roman Empire. An *asclepieion* is a healing temple dedicated to the demi-god Asclepius, the god of healing in the Roman and Greek pantheon. This pool had been around in one form or another since the 8th century. In Jesus' time, there was an upper pool and lower pool divided by a dam, thus creating the 5 porticoes, or porches, of the pool. Both pools were almost 20 feet deep, which only added to the mystical understanding of the place. Several times a day, the sluice gate would be opened between the pools, allowing the fresher water in the upper pool to flow into the lower pool, thus '*stirring the waters*'.

The name *Bet-hesda*, in Hebrew means '*House of Mercy, or Grace*'. But it is also a pun. *Hesda* can also mean disgrace or shame. In other words, the disgraced and shamed of society gather in the place of healing for the opportunity of mercy and grace.

So let's begin again: During a sacred time of year, in the holiest city of the Jewish people, the city of peace, Jerusalem, on the most sacred day of the week, Sabbath, Jesus walks into the sacred Roman temple dedicated to the god of healing.

There, on one of the porticoes, is a man who has been there for 38 years. This man is at the Pool of Bethesda with the blind, the lame, the invalid, the really sick. This man is an invalid. He can't walk. He can't get to the pools to get into the waters to be made well. He has waited 38 years to get to the waters. He lives at the Pool of Mercy and Grace, in his disgrace and shame.

This is a man of complete hopelessness. But I hope you catch something else going on here as well. We are in Jerusalem, the city of the Jewish people. This man is a Jew, otherwise the religious leaders at the end of our story wouldn't care so much about what has happened to him on this day. Here is the question: *What is a Jew doing at a holy Roman temple?*

A Jew going to the Temple of Asclepius, the god of healing in the Roman and Greek pantheon, for healing is an act of complete desperation. All other avenues have been taken before arriving here for this man, and here he has been for 38 years. At the same time, though, part of the struggle for the religious authorities of the day in Jerusalem was the syncretic adoption of Roman beliefs and worship into the Jewish tradition - cafeteria style religion.

All this is in the background when Jesus walks up to the man on the portico and asks, "*Do you want to be made well?*"

It is a great question, isn't it? I am sure many of you know people who may have been legitimately sick at one point, and then they get sucked into the system. Once they are in, now sickness becomes a way of life. All the drugs, all the therapies, all the beliefs in the system - none lead to a better outcome. This man is now deep into a system of exclusion, a system of healing that has not worked at all for this man. The one question that begins to change everything is the question, *Do you want to be made well?*

The man is so embedded in his situation, he cannot answer the question. It is likely Jesus' question doesn't even make sense to him. He answers a *who* and *what* question with a *why* question. '*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.*' This is really no answer at all, other than the voice of suffering and desperation.

Healing, at least in the Christian sense of healing, is all about wholeness, about becoming aligned with the Kingdom of God, with the grace and mercy of God. Becoming whole, becoming healed, is the process of drawing closer to God and Christ. And there are levels of healing as well. There is healing at the level of the body; healing at the level of the mind and soul; healing at the level of family; healing at the level of community; healing at the level of nation and world; healing at the level of the natural world we inhabit; healing of the cosmic breach between the individual, the community, and the universe.

Wholeness in the Christian sense is also about order out of chaos. Sickness, acute or chronic, is a state of chaos in the body and/or mind and/or soul. Wholeness and healing bring order to the chaos. In simple terms, bodies function well when they are in what is

called *homeostasis*, a state of internal equilibrium where all the dependent systems communicate well with one another. When a body goes out of *homeostasis*, it becomes chaotic. If not dealt with immediately, one chaotic system begins to influence other, ordered systems with chaos as well. In this way of thinking, illness, sickness, being unwell are all states of chaos.

This man on the portico is in a weird form of chaos because there is no movement in his situation or condition. It is deeply disturbing, and we are meant to be disturbed by his situation because his situation is meant to mirror the spiritual chaos of Jerusalem and Rome alike.

*Do you want to be made well?*

Imagine with me for a moment an analogy. Imagine that the human soul is in its most whole, most healed, most ordered state when it is aligned with its most innocent origins, its most pure place of understanding and spirit. In the Bible, this place is imagined as the Garden of Eden. We leave the Garden for whatever reason - sin, shame, ego. It doesn't matter because once we leave, God tells us there are also broken relationships that we take with us. We take chaos with us into the wide world, in other words. Broken relationships with our bodies, with one another, with creation itself, with our work. Imagine these broken relationships are like filters in front of the lens of a camera, as blocks that have been inserted between us and wholeness. They distort the view of what was once seen clearly.

Now imagine our man on the portico. What might some of his filters, his blocks, between him and wholeness be?

I'm sure it's different for everyone.

*"I don't deserve healing"*

*"It's not / I'm not that important."*

*"I deserve the suffering I have."*

*"I can't ask for myself (I have to only ask on others' behalf)."*

*"I am a victim."*

*"I don't believe the right things. I didn't have enough faith."*

*"I'm enraged at the world."*

*"I know I can't tolerate wholeness and beauty."*

I think the last one, the inability to tolerate wholeness, love, and beauty, is one of the most important and most hidden for us. On the one hand, I am pretty sure most of us don't really know what love and wholeness and beauty really are. We can only know these qualities based on our own experience, and if we have all these barriers, these

blocks, these distortions, clouding our view, we only have glimpses and graspings at what these qualities really mean. We live distorted lives in relationship to love, beauty and wholeness. We have to acknowledge from the very start our broken relationship with Creation, with one another, with ourselves, with God. Knowing this means we acknowledge how little we actually know about...anything.

On the other hand, if you have read your Bible and have lived close to the Spirit and to Jesus, you know very well that love and beauty and wholeness are achievable and available to you and to everyone right now. I think those little glimpses of true beauty, true love, true wholeness that we see and experience are so overwhelming for us that we can't imagine walking around in this world that open, that vulnerable, that sensitive, and so we don't. We not only don't want to, we actually can't walk around surrounded by love, beauty and wholeness. And so we push off the Godly order of things so we can live in the chaos, because we have convinced ourselves of the truth of the filters and blocks and barriers we have in place. Chaos becomes easier than the potential suffering that being open, vulnerable, and sensitive can cause.

Jesus doesn't wait for a better answer from the man on the portico, nor does Jesus even wait for the man's permission. Jesus simply heals the man on the portico. *"Take up your mat, and walk."*

It is one thing to heal somebody on the Sabbath. But to heal an idolator, someone who worships other gods, is the height of offense for the religious authorities.

In a single act Jesus subverts the Roman Empire by defying one of their greatest gods in that god's holy place - Jesus heals the man; not Asclepius; and also defies the Jewish authorities by healing on the holiest day of the week during a sacred holiday. It is an act of deliberate political, spiritual, and human provocation designed to exact the most outrage possible by all sides. That is why we should be amazed by this story.

Do you see now how this is not just one more healing?

I have a theory about this man who has been healed. I believe this man will spend the rest of his life trying to answer the question, *Do you want to be made well?* He will analyze the question every day when he wakes up, every time he takes a walk, every time he enters the temple of Jerusalem, every time he prays to God. He will take apart the question:

*Who am I?*

*What do I want?*

*What does it mean to be well?*

*Who is Jesus?*

*What does it mean to believe Jesus made me well?*

*What was really wrong with me in the first place that his mere word could make me whole?*

*What does it mean to be made whole?*

This is the essence of prayer. It is the deep quality of being in relationship to God and Christ and the Holy Spirit to have this kind of conversation.

In those questions, in the wondering about wholeness, the rivers of life-giving water flow into the lower pools of our consciousness and awaken true healing and hope and trust in God and Jesus. The wellsprings of healing continually begin to bubble up from deep within our souls. Paul says in 2 Cor 13:5:

*Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that **Jesus Christ is in you?***

Just as God spoke the chaos of the universe into the order of Creation, so also Jesus spoke wholeness into the chaos of this man on the portico. Note that the man did not even have to go into the waters to be made well. Why would he? Asclepius is way cool. Even today, the symbol of the medical doctor is the symbol of this god of healing, two snakes swirling around a pole. 4000 years of history are behind that symbol. But Asclepius is not Jesus or God.

Devotion and trust in God's spoken word is devotion and trust in the healing and wholeness of God alone. And it is God's word that Jesus speaks to the man on the portico. It is Jesus' word that makes this man whole.

And what does wholeness look like? What does the unfiltered, vulnerable, open, sensitive experience of an ordered creation look like, especially after a time of brokenness and disunity and chaos?

It looks like:

*the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations...the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light (Rev 22:1-5)*

Amen.