

The Fruit of Gentleness - The Spirit of Healing

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Acts 3:1-10; John 5

I want to suggest that our healing leads to and generates the fruit of gentleness. Our healing occurs when we put ourselves in the path of Jesus' healing presence. The two gentlemen in our readings, the man at the pool of Bethesda and the man at the Beautiful Gate, are in the way. I am sure many of you have a sense of what it means to be in the way or if you have been sick or injured, you might often feel you are in the way of other people. The man at the pool of Bethesda on the portico is in the way of everyone else as they push him aside to get to the pool.

When we are talking about healing we are talking about wholeness, becoming whole again in body, mind and spirit. In the ancient world, they believed external deformities, like the man at Beautiful Gate who has been lame since birth, meant something was wrong with your character. What was shown in the body was a reflection of something wrong in the mind and the soul. In the ancient world, then, they looked very highly on those who were healthy and hale, well-developed and beautiful; they were raised up in the eyes of the culture. People who did not measure up were pushed aside, forced to sit at pools and outside the gates of cities.

In the ancient world, things wrong with the body were an opportunity to exclude people. Then Jesus comes along, and after Jesus, Peter. They do exactly the opposite. They suggest by their action that whatever is wrong with the body has nothing to do with the state of your soul. In fact, the state of your soul reflects your true health, not the other way around. So when Jesus heals the man at Bethesda, the man becomes whole, he becomes included into the family of God. Healing for Jesus means inclusion. Sickness and deformity becomes an opportunity for inclusion and healing, not an excuse for exclusion. This is so important in these stories - the willful inclusion of those who have been excluded and pushed out of the way because they are sick and not well.

In John 5, we have this man who is at the pools of Bethesda. What the people are waiting for there is for the surface of the water to be disturbed and when the surface is disturbed some manuscripts say *and they waited for the stirring of the water for the 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.* In other words, the pool had supernatural healing properties and immediate healing came to the first person into the pool.

Jesus comes upon this man who has been who has been there for 38 years, waiting to get into this pool. People have been going in front of him, pushing him out of the way, he can't get down there, no one will take him there, on and on, for 38 years. Often this passage will be preached as a judgment against this man for his lack of will and lack of personal responsibility. Perhaps, however, his lack of will is a reflection of his illness and not reflective of who he is. It is a symptom, not a cause or reflection of what he is or is not doing. He is just trying to get well.

So Jesus asks him, *Do you want to get well?* What happens next is very interesting. The man does not answer the question. It is a little bit like a political debate - the moderator asks a question but the answer almost always has nothing to do with the question asked. The man's answer to the question is *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 gets down ahead of me.* This is neither a *yes* or a *no*. It is simply a declarative statement about what happens when the man is there. The man has not answered the question *Do you want to be made well?* Nor does he know who Jesus is. So notice: the healing here is not dependent on whether or not he wants to be made well (he doesn't answer that question), and it is not dependent on confessing that Jesus is Lord or the Son of God. There is no confession of faith whatsoever here.

Jesus says, *That is your answer? Then stand up and walk. Pick up your mat and walk.* The healing is completely and wholly dependent on the power of God. This man who is in the way is now in the way of the healing of Jesus. When we think of our sicknesses, when we think of our illnesses, perhaps we are being put in that position by God so we can be in the way of, not other people, but of Jesus so we can experience the healing love of Christ.

We see this same thing in Acts 3 when Peter and John come upon the man at the gate. The man is carried there every day and he begs for alms. Peter comes upon him and does not ask a question. All he says is *Look at me.* The man expects Peter and John to give him stuff, but all Peter says is *Look at me, look at us.* Then he says, *I don't have silver or gold to give you, but what I have I will give you and what I have is the power of the Holy Spirit, which I am giving to you right now, so stand up and walk.* The man is thrilled. His cycle of dependency at the gate is broken. He is now able to take initiative on his own and act in the world on his own rather than be dependent on others. The man jumps and skips and praises God. This reminds me of Psalm 29, where it says *The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf and Syron like a young, wild ox.*

I don't know if you have ever seen a goat or lamb skip when they are happy, but they are expressing unbridled joy. It is a wonderful thing to witness. That is what this man is doing in this story. He is like a newborn colt, dancing around, praising God, jumping for joy.

What I think is going on for both of these men - the one at the pools of Bethesda and the one outside the gate of Jerusalem: they are both completely identified with their illness. They are, in their experience and mindset, the illness that they have. "I am my illness", is what they are probably thinking. It has been a while, thank God, since I have had the flu. Quite a few Christmases ago, I had a bad case of the flu with a high fever and all the other symptoms one experiences with the flu. I watched my daughter open her gifts, spent a few minutes with the family, then went to bed for the rest of the afternoon. I woke up in the afternoon, and from the perspective of the fever and flu I was suffering from, I looked out onto my life. My whole life looked sick. My whole life looked like it had the flu. I wanted everything to change.

Part of the reason that happens is because we identify with the sickness. I was my high fever. I was the nausea I was suffering. I was the flu. It taught me an important lesson: never, ever make a big decision about your life when you are sick, in bed, suffering. From the perspective of being sick, everything will look sick. We become identified with the problems we have. Perhaps the issue is with your body,

or perhaps it is with your mind, or perhaps you are soul-sick. We identify with it and then we become it - I am my flu; I am my leg that doesn't work; I am my clogged heart; I am my depression; I am my dysfunctional family. Whatever it is, we become identified with those things.

What Jesus and Peter do is break the identification with the illness. The question, "Do you want to get well?", is not so much a "yes or no" question as it is a "where" question: "where are you with this illness?" Breaking the identification with the illness means recognizing that we are in the way. The question is, are we in the way of other people or are we in the way of Jesus Christ? Are we willing to get in the way of Christ so we can get well, whether in the mind, body or soul? Some illnesses do not recover, but we can recover our mind and our soul. Some conditions of the mind affect the body, but if we break the identification with the illness we can have health of soul and body. Some conditions affect the soul, and if we can heal the body and mind, the soul will begin to see clearly and recover as well.

Psalm 18 says, "You have given me the shield, O Lord, of your salvation, and your right hand has supported me; your gentleness has made me great." Your gentleness has made me great; your healing has made me whole. In both our readings, Peter and Jesus say, "Pick up your mat and walk. You are no longer subject to this condition you have, this illness you suffer from."

What does all this have to do with gentleness? When we speak of the Holy Spirit in healing, we are called to remember how we were in the way of others and how much work it was to get in the way of Jesus Christ so that we could be healed. If we can get in the way of Jesus and remember how much work it was to get in the way, that is where the fruit of gentleness begins to arise. Then, when we are dealing with others who are suffering, we can remember where we were when we were suffering. We can then treat them with the gentleness we would have hoped for, like this man at the pools of Bethesda. He was looking for gentleness; he was looking for kindness; he was looking for somebody to take him into the healing waters. Jesus comes and says, "You don't even need the pool anymore, just look to me and I will heal you".

Ephesians 4 says something about gentleness, "Therefore, I, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called (remember where you came from), with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling..." Remember, remember, remember is what Paul is telling the Ephesians in these words. Remember when you were suffering, so that when you deal with people who are suffering, the fruit of gentleness is always present so you can be with others. And here is where they may have the opportunity to get in the way of Jesus Christ rather than feeling like they are in the way of family, friends and caregivers. When we remember our healing in Christ, the Holy Spirit provides avenues for the fruit of gentleness. Remember what Jesus says in Matthew. He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, my yoke is gentle, and my burden is light". Amen.