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 John 5:1-9
 Twelfth Message
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THE HEALING QUESTION

The gospel of John, the “beloved disciple,” tells the story of Jesus. Each of us has a story, and every story is important. But there is one story that is central, and that is the story of redemption. The secret of spirituality is to find our story in the one story. If we want to see Jesus, we need to immerse ourselves in the gospels.

In John 5 we come to a new section of the apostle’s text. This gospel has two major divisions: the book of signs (chapters 2-12), and the book of glory (chapters 13-20). Chapters 11-12 form a bridge between these two parts, concluding the first and introducing the second. The book of signs has three subdivisions. Just as chapters 2-4 form a cohesive unit, bracketed by two signs which took place at Cana (the changing of water into wine and the healing of the official’s son), so too chapters 5-10 form a cohesive unit. The unity of this section is evident in the repetition of three phrases at its beginning and end:

Jesus does the works of the Father	5:17, 20, 36	10:25,32,37,38
Jesus refers to God as his Father	14x in 5:1-47	9x in 10:22-42
Jews seek to kill Jesus	5:18	10:33, 39

Several characteristics of chapters 5-10 distinguish this section from chapters 2-4:

1. The primary word for miracles in 2-4 is “sign”; in 5-10 it changes to “works.”
2. The miracles in 2-4 are requested by others; in 5-10 they are initiated by Jesus. There are four miracles: the healing of the paralytic, the feeding of the 5,000, the occasion when Jesus walked on water, and the healing of the blind man.
3. The miracles in John 5-10 are all followed by a dialogue or discourse, which was not the case in chapters 2-4.
4. In John 4, Jesus reveals himself as Messiah (4:25-26) and prophet (4:44); while in chapter 5 he begins to openly manifest his divinity (5:17-30).
5. There is a strong opposition to Jesus in 5-10 which is not found in 2-4: Jesus causes division (7:43; 9:16; 10:19); the Jews seek to arrest Jesus (7:30, 32, 44; 8:20; 10:39); the Jews seek to stone Jesus (8:59; 10:31, 33); the Jews seek to kill Jesus (5:18; 7:1, 19, 25; 8:37, 40).

The most important thing to grasp about chapters 5-10 is that the story centers on four Jewish feasts or holy days: Sabbath, 5:9; 9:14; Passover, 6:4; Tabernacles, 7:2; and Dedication, 10:22. We can see this reflected in the following chiastic structure.¹ Just like chapters 2-4, there are six episodes in the section:

- A The Son of God heals a paralytic on Sabbath 5:1-47
- B The Bread of Life feeds the 5,000 on Passover 6:1-71
- C Jesus the source of living water and light of the world at Tabernacles 7:1-8:59
- C’ The Light of the World gives sight to the blind on a Sabbath 9:1-41
- B’ Jesus is the good shepherd and the door 10:1-21
- A’ The works of Jesus identify him as the Son of God at Dedication 10:22-42

The excitement of Samaria and Galilee now gives way to foreboding as Jesus begins to come into conflict with the Jewish authorities. There is a shift from mere reservation and hesitation regarding Jesus to outright and sometimes official opposition. The reason for this is clear: Jesus is redefining the symbols of Judaism in himself. He makes a number of offensive statements, and people have to make a choice. This is what is so important for each of us to consider. We can’t make Jesus be who we want him to be. We must consider whether we will accept him for who he claims to be.

This brings us to our text.

After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered [waiting for the moving of the waters, for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted]. (John 5:1-4 NASB)

The phrase “after these things” introduces the next three chapters. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to attend a certain feast which John does not identify. This is deliberate on his part. The issue will be the Sabbath, and John does not want his readers to become confused.

There was a pool near the sheep gate called Bethesda. This is either a Hebrew or Aramaic word. Bethesda is the Greek transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning the “house of outpouring” or “house of twin outpourings.” The presumed site has been uncovered. It is located near the Church of St. Anne, in the northeast quarter of the Old City, near Nehemiah’s Sheep Gate (Neh 3:1, 32; 12:39). There were two pools, lying north and south, surrounded by four covered colonnades in a rough trapezoid, with a fifth colonnade separating the two.

A multitude of people, sick, blind, crippled and withered, was sitting around these pools. The comment in verse 4 about an angel coming down to stir up the water is not in the Greek text; it was added at a later time to explain verse 7. The pools were fed by large reservoirs, but they might also have been fed by intermittent springs which caused a disturbance in the water.

The number five is noteworthy. Assuredly it is a reference to the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. Just as the water of purification could not give the joy of the wine of the Spirit at the wedding in chapter 2, so the water of the law cannot bring salvation and healing at the pool of Bethesda.

A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, "Do you wish to get well?" The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me." Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk." Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began to walk. (5:5-9)

Lying by the pool is a man who has been sick for thirty-eight years. We are not told the nature of his illness, but we can assume from verse 7 that he was paralyzed, lame or exceedingly weak. When you walk the streets of certain parts of San Francisco or travel in Third World cities like Cairo and Jakarta you see people like this lying by the side of the road. These people are beggars, and they have no hope. We can only imagine the mental and emotional state of this man who had been lying by the pool for so long. Imagine how he lived, how he ate, where he slept.

Whether there is significance to the number thirty-eight is unclear. Perhaps it is an allusion to the number mentioned in Deuteronomy 2:14, the period of time that Israel wandered unnecessarily in the wilderness: "Now the time that it took for us to come from Kadesh-barnea until we crossed over the brook Zered was thirty-eight years, until all the generation of the men of war perished from within the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them."

Jesus knows that the man has been there a long time. Once again Jesus displays supernatural knowledge. There were many people lying around this pool, and yet the Spirit of God was at work in directing him to this one person. No reason is given for this choice. It was simply the sovereignty of God at work. The same principle holds true in our lives. God directs us to one person and not another. God chooses, and we don't know why. Jesus could have healed everyone around this pool, and yet this one man receives his attention.

Jesus approaches the man and asks him the million-dollar question: "Do you want to get well?" One can only imagine the incredulous look on the man's face in response. Was he thinking, "Are you serious? Do birds fly in the sky? Why else would I be here if I didn't want to be healed? The problem is

that I have no one to help me so I cannot be healed." This is the grumbling of a crotchety old man. He has no one to help him. He is friendless and alone.

Jesus does not try to find a friend for him. He simply commands him to rise, pick up his pallet and walk. The mat or bed was made of straw and was light enough to roll up and carry. Jesus was not being sarcastic or harsh. He wasn't telling the man to get up and get a job. He just told him to rise and walk. Amazingly, the man responds as Jesus commanded him. After thirty-eight years of misery he is completely healed. Later we discover that he doesn't even know who Jesus is. Still he is willing to stand up and begin walking. That alone is remarkable.

There is both a theological and practical significance to Jesus' healing of this man.

Theologically, what Jesus did was a fulfillment of Jewish eschatological hope. According to the law, this man was excluded from worship because of his condition: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron, saying, "No man of your offspring throughout their generations who has a defect shall approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a defect shall approach: a blind man, or a lame man, or he who has a disfigured face, or any deformed limb"'" (Lev 21:16-18). But Israel hoped that the day was coming when the blind would see and the lame walk:

**Then the eyes of the blind will be opened
And the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.
For waters will break forth in the wilderness
And streams in the Arabah. (Isa 35:5-6).**

With a word, Jesus points to the fact that he is the one sent from God to fulfill his promises to his people. Jesus is saying that those days have arrived. There would be life-giving waters in the wilderness and streams in the desert. He was gathering broken sons and daughters and making them whole.

Another theological implication is that once again Jesus points to the fact that he superseded the law. The water motif is very prominent in John. It is a symbol of old Judaism, a symbol of Torah. The water of purification in chapter 2 could not produce the joy of the wine of the Spirit. That water failed. The water from Jacob's well in chapter 4 could not satisfy the woman's thirst. That water failed also. The water from the pool in Jerusalem could not heal the lame man. He had been at the pool for a long time, but the water had failed. What he needed was living water. He was not healed by the angel who troubled the water but by the man from above who troubled the religious leaders.

The man represents Israel: the nation was still in the wilderness. Keeping the law does not get us out of the wilderness. Religion does not satisfy our thirst. Religion will not heal us. We need something greater than law. We need living water. We need Jesus.

This is the downfall of religion. We fall into the trap of thinking that we can fix our lives with a little good old-fashioned religion. In the West, the church has evolved into an organization for managing people's lives, suggesting how good Christians should act and vote. We focus on externals and lose sight of Jesus. There are many broken people lying around pools in our community. They need Jesus, not religious rules. They want to see Jesus, but they do not want to go to church.

This healing also has very practical implications for us. Do we want to get well? What a great question this is. Many of us are bruised and broken and sick. We suffer physically, emotionally or spiritually. We are paralyzed and unable to act. Year after year we find ourselves in the same place, waiting for something to happen. We claim that we want to be healed and we talk about being healed, but if truth be known, we are content to remain in the condition that afflicts us. Our identity is based on pain and suffering. We find comfort in self-pity, resentment and lack of forgiveness. We don't want to stop playing the victim in our drama. We form a strange friendship with our pain and are often unwilling to give it up. Or if we are open to accepting healing, we want it on our terms. We don't want to leave Egypt. We want to stay in the wilderness that has become home.

In the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, a man wrongfully imprisoned befriends a prisoner, Red, who has been inside most of his life. Finally, the lifer is paroled. But he faces a huge dilemma. He has been in prison so long, enslaved to a confined lifestyle, he doesn't know if he can change and live on the outside. Another parolee who was released before him couldn't make it and took his own life. Red faces the same choice. Does he really want to change, or does he want the security of the life he has come to know in prison? The choice is between life and death.

Year after year we say we are going to get fitter and eat healthier, but we don't change. We complain about being stuck in an unhealthy marriage, and yet we don't take any steps toward getting help. We don't want to get counseling; we just want the other person to change. We find ourselves paralyzed by unhealthy family dynamics but we don't talk about it and seek ways to change those patterns.

There are areas of sin in our life that we know we should change but yet, if we are honest about it, we really don't want to change. The sin serves a purpose in our life: it keeps us numb and unfeeling so that we don't have to face the pain. Change is scary and hard. Just last week, God told me to change my whole message. He told me he didn't want me to talk about three things, but about one thing: the healing question. I didn't want to change. My message was ready to be preached. I have all my texts laid out for the next two years. I was ready for the Olympics!

Change is hard because we don't know what change will bring. The paralyzed man knew that if he was truly healed, life would be so much different. And it was different. He was

accused of doing something wrong. Red wanted to get out of prison, but living on the outside was scary; prison life was easier. Healing means we will have to face unknown territory and uncharted waters.

Do we really want to get well? Do we really want to change? Getting past that question might be more difficult than actually being healed. You might say, "But you don't know my situation. You don't know my family. You don't know my marriage situation. I can't change. I don't have anyone to help me." But that sounds like the man in our story. Oftentimes it's our own hard heart that keeps us from rising and walking.

Maybe we have to think about our expectations. Healing is the subject of one-fifth of the gospel texts. Our expectations for a healing God have been so reduced that we really don't think God can do much. A lot of factors contribute to this, things like materialism and lack of community. We limit God by making him predictable. We get stuck in our categories, just like the Jews. We don't let Jesus surprise and amaze us. The truth is that the sacrifice of Jesus was so complete that the old can be completely transformed by the new. The old isn't replaced by religion, by a good moral life. The old is replaced by Jesus. If we don't believe this we will not be healed.

We might ask, "Is healing as simple as rising and walking?" It can be at times. If this is what we find in the gospels, maybe we should be a little more hopeful. About a year ago, my own family became aware of a certain dynamic that had been a major part of our interaction and shaped our relationships. We were stuck. One day someone pointed this out to us, saying that we should not do this particular thing anymore. We agreed, and the pattern changed immediately.

We can rise and walk in newness of life, especially if we don't worry about fixing the past, laying blame or carrying our guilt. Jesus didn't spend two hours counseling this man. He just told him to rise and walk. Sometimes we get stuck in the past and that keeps us living and walking in the present. The world says, you made your bed, now lie in it. Jesus says, pick up your bed and walk. What bed are you lying in? What might God be asking you to simply pick up?

Having said that, I agree that some people are called to endure certain afflictions for many years. Others with great hearts and great attitudes pray for healing and nothing happens. What we must see is that these situations also find their purpose in God's plans. We continue praying and trusting in his sovereignty. We learn how to fight spiritual battles. We learn how to walk in faith, believing in the goodness of God even when there is no dramatic healing. Walking in newness of life doesn't necessarily mean having a new body or finding a new spouse.

This topic of healing is a complicated issue, and I certainly don't have all the answers. But God does have a really good question for us to consider. Even though we can't reduce healing to a formula, there are three things that we can say for certain.

God wants us to walk in freedom and newness of life. This is why he sent not a slave but his own Son. All of our iniquity, sin and darkness fell on him so that we might be healed, so that the blind can see and the lame walk.

While the struggles we face loom large, God is not powerless. The resurrection assures us of this. I came to Christ because I recognized I was powerless to change my life. I wanted to change. I needed to change. I knew that something was wrong with coming home from the bars most nights. But in my own strength I was incapable of change. We need to remember that it does not depend on us.

We can't heal others. We can show them Jesus, we can ask them the right questions, but if they don't want to get well, our efforts and actions can't control the outcome of their lives. We can actually become a hindrance to their getting well.

This text leaves us with much to ponder. There is another very important element to this story, and we will talk about that next week. But for today we would do well to consider the question that Jesus asked the man at the pool: "Do you want to get well?" If our answer is yes, then he says to us, as he said to that man, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk."

1. George Mlakuzhyil, S.J., *The Christocentric Literary Structure of the Fourth Gospel* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1987).

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