

"A Sick Man By the Pool"

The setting is a large pool of water in Jerusalem, called Bethesda, or Bethsaida, or Bethzatha. Jesus is there. A lot of sick people are there too. The Gospel of John describes this place: "Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, Called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed" (John 5:2-3). This is like an open-air sanitarium. In fact, there are 5 porches (shelters) to protect all the invalids and ill people who gathered there.

The pool became known as a healing place. Apparently there was an underground stream that would occasionally bubble up and stir the waters. A legend developed that an angel every so often came down and stirred the waters, and the first person to get in got healed. This must have happened at least a few times, because sick people kept coming there to be healed.

One man was there who had been ill for 38 years! It says he had been coming there "a long time". For some reason, Jesus chose to heal *this man*. "When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'" (John 5:6). How did he answer? "The sick man answered him, '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'" (verse 7). It seems from the way John tells the story that Jesus wasted no time healing this man. "Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk'" (verse 8). And he did just that! He folded up the cot or the mat he was laying on, and started to walk!

This was truly a *miracle*! It's one of many, many accounts of Jesus healing someone. Yet, as I read *this* narrative, it seems to me something is going on beneath the surface - that we're not just dealing with a straight-forward story of physical healing. For instance, Jesus asks the man, "Do you want to be made well?" I mean, why would Jesus ask that? The man's been crippled for almost 40 years! Why wouldn't he want to be made well? Perhaps something else was going on in this man's life, besides his physical ailment, that needed to be addressed.

Another thing: Jesus later looked this man up. "Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you'" (John 5:14). What an odd thing to say! Was there something wrong, sinful, in this man's past or present which was the root cause of the man's illness? Something seems to be out of kilter here besides this man's paralyzed or disabled body.

With this story as a background, I want to talk about sickness and healing today, but not just the healing of our physical ailments. There are other ways of being sick.

We can have sick attitudes that need to be healed. You wonder if this man in the story didn't have an attitude problem! Jesus says, "Do you want to get well?" And we can almost hear this man whimper, "Well there's no one to help me into the pool when the water's stirred. I'm trying my best to get in first, but someone always butts ahead of me." Sob, sob. Maybe he was full of self-pity. Maybe he had a dependent personality and lacked self-initiative, always blaming someone else for his failures. Some of our sick attitudes can be just as debilitating as physical illness: negative thinking, ingratitude, self-centeredness, having a critical spirit. Sometimes

these attitudes problems can be passed onto the body and be the root cause of physical ailments. We humans are a unity of body, mind and spirit. And if there is dysfunction in one of these areas it can spill over into the others.

Then there are some of us who need healing from the past. Erik Erickson was a psychologist who outlined what he considered stages of a person's life, and the developmental tasks at each stage. It was a theory that has gained wide acceptance. For instance, he maintained that the first year of our life helps determine whether we develop trust or mistrust. As an infant, were we nurtured in a way that we learned to trust people and our surroundings? In years 2 and 3, he suggested that the developmental task is "autonomy vs. doubt". Did we break off from mommy and daddy as a separate person in a healthy way? In the 4th and 5th years of our life the task is "initiative vs. guilt" – in other words, were we encouraged to try things on our own and do things ourselves? Did we develop positive self-esteem, or were we given a message that we were bad or inadequate of lacking worth?

There were other stages all through life in Erickson's understanding of how we develop. And the thing is, he said if we fail to develop in positive ways at any stage, we tend to carry that trait through life! For instance, a person who in the first year of their life never developed innate trust could be the person who always tends to be suspicious, or has difficulty trusting in a caring and loving God. The person who at 4 or 5 who had a mother who typically said, "No, no, don't do that, you'll get hurt", or who created a sense of shame whenever a child tried a new thing – like bringing a frog into the house, or making a mud pie – can be the adult who's afraid to take risks, or is bothered with a sense of low self-esteem.

We may be skeptical, and say, "C'mon, what does all that stuff have to do with how I act now?" The answer is simply: *Plenty!* It wasn't long before I started to counsel people as a young pastor that I began to connect a person's childhood experiences with the problems they brought into my study for counseling. Even without hours of training, I began to probe a bit, and ask people about their upbringing, their relationship to mom and dad. We're learning today, for example, that children who grew up with one or both parents as alcoholics will most likely bring into adulthood certain predictable problem behaviors. There are support groups, and books written about adult children of alcoholics.

The truth is, many of us grew up in families that in some ways were dysfunctional, and that affects how we act as adults in our marriages, our parenting, and our relationships with others. I once saw a cartoon. There was this stage and huge auditorium. A banner across the front said, "Convention for Adult Children of Functional Families." And the cartoon showed only one or two people in the whole auditorium. *Some of us need healing of the past.*

Some of us may need healing in our present relationships. As I think about the man by the pool, healed by Jesus, I can't help but wonder if the "sin" Jesus told the man not to repeat had something to do with one of the important relationships of his life. Is there a relationship in our family, in our marriage, in our jobs, in our friendships, that is unhealthy or dysfunctional?

One of the more recent developments in counseling and therapy is what's called a "systems approach" – that individual problems can only be understood by looking at the whole system (whether the system is the family, the work place, the church, etc.). For instance, if you have a child acting out, instead of dragging the kid into a counselor and saying, "Fix my kid!", the counselor looks at what's going on in the family, and the role that everyone plays in the dysfunction. So instead of the child being the patient, the family is the "patient".

So, we can be sick in many ways, not just physically. The man by the pool was physically disabled, but there seems to be other stuff going on that was probably tied in to his physical illness.

You know, I'd like to say that Christians don't have to worry about this, but that's not true!

When I first became a Christian, I thought if you just give yourself over to Christ, God saved you and healed you in every way. Not just the sin problem, but you'd have a great marriage, you'd never get depressed or have panic attacks. I mean, Jesus would heal you – right? But it didn't take long to change my mind on that! As a new Christian I discovered I still had my own struggles to be a healthy person mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

And especially when I became a pastor, I saw so many people in the church who were dedicated Christians, but had little self-understanding or self-insight. People of faith who were very sincere in their love for Christ, but were emotionally or psychologically wounded, and often causing all kinds of chaos in the church!

One of my all time favorites along this line was something I read in a magazine called Faith At Work. Keith Miller had a column, and people would write in to Keith (he was trained in psychology), and he'd help people with their problems from a Christian perspective. One man wrote this:

"Dear Keith Miller (I'm not going to be friendly enough to call you 'Keith' and I don't respect you enough to call you 'Mr.'. I can't stand you and I feel led to let you know. The main gripe have is that you claim to have been a born-again Christian for all these years (and I assume that you have the Holy Spirit – although you're pretty cagey about saying) and you still are not living the victorious life. You write about having problems with relationships and even with faith and total dedication. Well, I for one want you to know that because of Christ, I DON'T HAVE ANY PROBLEMS. I am so angry with you that I can't sleep because you are leading people to feel that Christ is not adequate. And I want to repeat that since I have received the Holy Spirit this year I have not had any PROBLEMS. What do you say to that?" (Signed, "Sleepless with anger. S.W.A.). How do you think Keith responded? He wrote: "Dear S.W.A.: Well, you seem to have at least one now."

Jesus said to the man by the pool, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:6). I believe Jesus is saying to us here today, "Do you want to get well?" We've looked at ways we can be sick and dysfunctional, but the focus of the story in John 5 is not on our sickness, but on *the healing power of Jesus! Jesus is the Healer!*

Now most of us would like *instant* healing. Fix me now! And sometimes God heals us miraculously, instantaneously! Praise God! But most of the time healing comes in stages, more gradually, but it is no less a miracle!

Here are some steps and things we can do to access the healing power of Christ!

First, we have to want to get well. Sometimes there are benefits to being sick. People may take pity on us. We can enjoy being dependent on others and not have to put forth effort ourselves. We can take satisfaction in holding onto that grudge against somebody and nursing it. The pain of being sick or dysfunctional must be greater than any benefit we have in being sick if we are going to be motivated to change and be well!

Second, we have to accept responsibility. Quit blaming others. Quit making excuses. If there are family issues, what's my part in that? If I didn't get a good start in life because of my upbringing, what am I going to do to get healthier and not just blame mom or dad, or both? Part of accepting responsibility might mean admitting we have mental health issues, and we need professional counseling, or psychiatric help. Thankfully, we are coming to realize that there's no shame in seeking this kind of health. We go to a doctor if there's a physical problem. We go to a therapist or psychologist or psychiatrist if there are emotional or mental health problems.

Thirdly, believe in a Christ who cares for you and has the power to make things whole and new! Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. As He walked the earth and healed people, He still is present in the world through His Spirit, and says to us, "Get up. Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8).

Fourth, use the spiritual resources of prayer and meditation. There is a body of research that suggests there is healing power in prayer and meditation. Dr. Jared Kass, a behavioral psychologist and medical school lecturer did research that showed the power of meditative prayer to reduce or eliminate tension-related diseases. Speaking at a conference, Dr. Kass said he and a colleague's research showed that repeated meditative prayer calms the hyper-arousal state induced by the stresses of modern life, and can have a positive effect on anything from heart disease and high blood pressure, to headaches, asthma and a variety of digestive ills. This meditative prayer can lead to dramatic lowering of blood pressure, oxygen consumption, carbon dioxide elimination and respiration rate.

Before I finish, I'd like to make one last point: ***The Church should be a place of healing.*** The Book of James says if anyone is in need of healing they should call for the elders of the church, and have them pray over the sick person and anoint that person with oil. Then it goes on to say this: "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (James 5:15-16). Notice, the healing is not just *physical*, but *spiritual* too! The forgiveness of sins.

The Church ought to be a place where we can be open and honest about our struggles and problems and sick areas of our life, and be loved and accepted and prayed for.

In one of the small churches I served our organist was an older lady. In the 5 years I was there, I came to love her as a sister in Christ. She was kind of gruff, but likeable. Nothing seemed to worry "Boots". She could ride with the tide and take life as it comes. Some years after I left that church I went back to speak at their Homecoming service. In the worship service we were sharing some of our memories and experiences. We laughed and cried together as we reminisced. Boots was still playing the organ, now in her 70's.

At one point in the service as we were sharing, she blurted out: "I was afraid of you!" I didn't know who she meant, since there were other pastors in the service. "You, Harry, I was afraid of you!" I came to find that every Sunday morning she had to take nerve pills to get through the service. She saw me as a perfectionist, and was afraid she wouldn't measure up in her playing. I was flabbergasted! I had no idea. I couldn't imagine she was *afraid of me*, making herself ill over it. Actually, in some ways she was intimidating to me, with her gruff exterior. Looking back, I just wish she had come to me and told me! I could have said, "Boots, I appreciate you so much! I love you as a sister in Christ. Just relax! We're all just doing the best we can."

The Church is meant to be a safe place, where we can be real and honest with each other about our brokenness, and find the healing of Christ mediated through our love and acceptance of each other.

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