

Do You Want To Be Healed?

By

Philip Gulley

Scripture: John 5:2-9a

Well, it is good to see you. Indeed, it is good to see anyone. **I ushered in the new year with a nasty case of bronchitis.** Woke up December 30th to the sound of the trumpet blast, then saw, out of the corner of my eye, the Angel of Death holding a sign with my name on it, like at the airport when someone you've never met is picking you up. **But at the last moment, just before I could say, "I think you're looking for me..." his cell phone rang and God told him to pick up someone else.**

To make it worse, a few days before Christmas, I had e-mailed a sermon out to folks and wrote that I wouldn't be speaking for several *months*. **I meant to say several weeks, but I didn't catch the error and a rumor began circulating that I was desperately ill and would be taking time off work to undergo treatment.** People called and sent cards and stopped by the house with food. It was like attending your own funeral, to be alive and hear so many nice things said about yourself. **I hesitated to correct this misperception, not wanting to deny anyone of the joy of ministry.** So I thanked them for their prayers and the food and their kindly solicitations.

It reminded me a bit of the story in John's Gospel when Jesus encountered a man at the pool of Bethzatha who'd been ill for 38 years and the first thing Jesus asked him was, "Do you want to be healed?" Well, the man had to stop and think it over. **Legend had it that an angel would descend from heaven to stir the waters in the pool and that the first person in would be healed.** This man had been waiting his turn for 38 years. The first time I read this, I felt sorry for the guy. Thirty-eight years is a long time to be sick. But then I thought how easy it is to make our peace with our infirmities, our inner hurts, and brokenness, so that after awhile they seem so much a part of us, so inevitable, so inescapable, that we forget how toxic our lives have become, we forget there are other ways to live, and it seems easier to remain sick. **This man had clearly made his peace with his sickness, just as we have made our peace with unhealthy things in our lives.**

I was at home the day after Christmas and our telephone rang. It was a friend whose 35 year-old husband is an alcoholic. **She'd called to tell us her husband was passed out, that she was taking their children and leaving for the day, and asked if I could come talk to him.** So I drove to their house and woke him up and offered to drive him up to Fairbanks Hospital for treatment. He said, "No thanks."

I asked him, "Don't you want to stop drinking? It's killing you. It's destroying your family. Don't you want to stop?"

He said, "I'm an alcoholic. Of course, I don't want to stop."

He was sprawled out on the couch, red-faced and depressed and miserable, and I just assumed he wanted to be healed. **But apparently he wanted to linger by the pool a little longer.** I talked with him for an hour or so, then left. Came home mad and frustrated and full of righteous indignation that he was unwilling to change and be healed. **But then I remembered those times in my life when being well and whole was such hard, painful, difficult work it was easier to lay down, pull the blankets over my head, and stay sick, stay incomplete, stay broken, not face my problems.**

After awhile, we might even view our brokenness as an asset—a hypochondriac who uses her “illness” to get sympathy, a spouse who uses anger to get control, a politician who achieves power by capitalizing on our fears, a corporation who’s found a way to not only profit from other people’s misery, but to prolong and expand that misery. I read an article this week about a company who receives money from government to run prisons. **There’s only one way to make money in that business, and that’s to make sure there’s a steady supply of customers, in this instance, prisoners, which means we have to criminalize more and more types of behavior, and this company has been quietly lobbying federal and state governments to do just that.**

So not everyone wants healing to happen. Not every leader wants to appeal to the best in others. Not every corporation wants people to be whole. **Just because we’re sitting next to the healing waters, doesn’t mean we want to be healed.** So Jesus asked the man, “Do you want to be healed?”

Remember the story in the book of Exodus when the Israelites had fled from their slavery in Egypt? They were delivered out of slavery, but they found freedom profoundly difficult and while in the desert grew nostalgic for Egypt. “Would that we have died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full!” (Exodus 16:3a)

Mental health, emotional health, spiritual health, and yes, sometimes even physical health, takes work, and resolve, and effort. **The man at the pool still had to take up his pallet and walk.** Jesus didn’t carry him to the waters. We’ve got to take up our pallet and walk.

In the Jewish tradition, there are ancient sayings and stories not found in the Bible, called the Midrash. One of the stories is an alternative description of the exodus from Egypt. **We’ve all seen the Cecil B. DeMille version in *The Ten Commandments* where the Israelites come to the Red Sea and Moses, played by Charlton Heston, lifts his up his staff and the waters part and Charlton Heston leads the Israelites safely across the sea, then causes the water to crash back and drown the Egyptian soldiers.** Pure Hollywood.

But the Midrash tells a different story. **In that story, the Israelites are fleeing and they reach the sea, the Egyptians are closing in on them, Moses lifts up his staff and commands the waters to part, but they don’t.** And the Egyptians are getting closer. Moses tries it again, but no luck. So this little Israelite named Nachshon jumps into the water and begins wading. Up to his ankles, then his knees, then his waist, then he’s in all the way up to his shoulders. **He stands**

on this tiptoes, tilts back his head and keeps wading into the water. Finally the only thing above the water are his nostrils.

Then the sea parts.¹

Lesson: Sometimes your circumstances will only get better when you jump in.

Do you want to be healed?

Listen, when Jesus approached the man and asked him that, he wasn't judging. **This was not a judgmental Jesus ridiculing a man's inaction and misfortune.** It was a loving invitation by our Lord inviting a broken man to jump into life and grow and change.

Do you want to be healed? It was an invitation to new life then. It is an invitation to new life now. Do you want to be healed?

¹ This story was taken from page 13 in A.J. Jacob's wonderful book, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible.*