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Do You Want to Be Healed?

John 5: 2-9; 14

I can see them in my mind's eye, the dozens of little orange-bound biographies of famous people that lined a corner of our church's library when I was a boy. I even remember the "formula" that each book followed: invariably, they focused first on these famous people's childhoods, easy for a kid to relate to, then moved to chronicle their later careers.

I had two favorites, the biography of Jim Thorpe, the Native-American who rose from obscurity to become the greatest athlete in the world, and the biography of Glenn Cunningham.

I don't suppose any of you young people recognize the name of Glenn Cunningham, but as a boy he was badly burned in a house fire. His injuries were such that his doctors informed his parents that he would not live, and then, when he amazingly endured and improved, these same physicians assured his parents that he would not walk, that his legs had been too disfigured by the fire.

Then would come my favorite part of the story, that section where Glenn Cunningham, using his brother and sister for crutches, rose from his bed to take his first steps, forcing himself to endure the recurring agony of stretching scar tissue until he could walk without aid. In time Glenn Cunningham discovered that he could run as easily as he could walk. He began to run, and kept running, mile after mile over the Kansas plains.

The sick man in the fifth chapter of John does not seem to have been made of Glenn Cunningham's fiber. Here was a man who had been suffering from a disease of paralysis for 38 years.

Yet here is also a man who had lived nigh to the waters of healing for a very long time, yet, he had never managed to find a way to enter the waters of healing.

The text implies that there were numerous diseased and handicapped folks living among the porticos who *had* managed to submerge in the divinely-agitated waters and had been healed of their afflictions, but though he had lived nigh to the healing waters longer than anyone, this particular man had never managed to make his way into them.

This is the very man to whom Jesus directs the question, "Sir, do you want to be healed?"

That seems like an incredibly stupid question to ask a paralyzed man, the kind of stupid question that you young people are asked at this commencement time of life, questions such as, 'Do you want to live a good life?

Do you want to have a positive impact on the world? Do you want to make the most of your talent?

Do you want to stand for what is right? Do you want to serve God in all that you do?

Do you want to live with integrity?' Stupid questions!

The obviously correct answer to all of these above questions is, 'Of course!'

But in real life you will find these questions are not nearly so stupid or as obvious as they first appear.

In real life, answering the call of such questions calls forth from you a heavy price.

Look closely at the initial exchange between our Lord and this man who has been diseased for so long: Jesus asks "Do you want to be healed?" His response is not, "Of course!"

Rather, he answers, "Sir, I don't have anyone to help me into the pool, and everyone else always beats me into the water."

What Jesus really wants to know from this man is,

“Do you *want* to be healed or is it only that you would *like* to be healed?”

At issue is more than semantics.

Do you really want to do great things with your life, or is it only that you would like to do great things if such a thing happens to happen?

Would you really desire to stand for justice and integrity, or would you just like to do this, if possible?

Jesus wants to know of this man, is healing his ambition,

his goal, his dream, his fervent expectation -- or is healing only a wish?

Does the desire to do great things swell up out of your heart, or is it merely a wistful itch?

Are you deeply committed to making the kind of choices that will change your life for the better

or are you one of those people who secretly thinks that meaningful change in your life is not probable?

If you only *wish* to make a great mark upon the world with your life, if your most heroic ambitions do not swell up out of the depths of your being, they will make no impact on the way you live.

The desire to accomplish greatness must root in the center of your soul.

Do you *intend* to accomplish great things or would you only *like* to accomplish great things, should such an opportunity happen by? There is a critical distinction at stake!

Jesus has good reason to suspect this man's powers of initiative.

Obviously, he has become resigned to the status quo.

After all, he has been sick 38 years, but had lived next to powers of transformation day after day, without ever successfully entering the water.

Sure, he may have had some setbacks along the way; he may have been elbowed out of line several times or been stood up by friends who had promised to help him.

He may have suffered some devastating defeats and disappointments.

But to live in the presence of healing that long without ever reaching the water suggests that this man had grown accustomed to his state of paralysis.

So, too, my young friends, there are going to come times when you are going to feel intense frustration, moments when life feels dry and listless, times when all your ambitions seem at a dead end.

There will be times when you want change to happen, yet nothing seems to change.

In such moments you must ask yourself, ‘Do I really want change?’

Or am I complacent with things just as they are. Am I afraid of the cost that change might bring?

Deep down, have I surrendered any real hope that I can change?’

Do you want to be healed and if so, do you have a plan to accomplish your goal?

Do you have a plan to take you from where you are to where you want to be?

An ambition without a plan is only a concept.”

You cannot accomplish anything of great value in your life without a plan to make it happen.

Notice something about this guy: he cannot work, not does he appear to be independently wealthy.

Yet he has managed to create a plan to support himself for almost four decades.

He has created a plan for survival, but he has never created a plan for putting himself in waters of healing.

Does that not strike you as strange?

Some of you I have known since you were little more than toddlers.

You have so much talent; you have big dreams and worthy ambitions. You ascribe to high ideals.

But a dream is just a concept until you can lay out a step-by-step process to make a dream a reality.

You may have to revise the plan, tear it up, create a new plan -- but you have to have a plan.

This man has no plan!

Jesus asks this man, “Do you want to be healed?” and what does he say?

“Nobody will help me get into the water; everybody else always beats me down.”

Read the Scripture as it really would have happened! The man was whining!

That response alone tells you that this man was weak of spirit. Why?

Because he shifts the onus of responsibility for his troubles from himself to other people.

The beginning of maturity is taking responsibility for one's own actions and accepting the consequences of those actions.

In this man's case, he is sure that his paralysis is everybody else's fault.

That's why president Harry Truman had a sign on his desk that said, “The Buck Stops Here,” for Truman knew that there is no more common personal or political ploy than that of evading personal responsibility.

The beginning of maturity comes with shouldering blame when you make a mistake.

You already know that life is going to force you to endure great moments of disappointment, moments of devastating loss.

Life will demand that you struggle with moments of frustration and depression – at times all of your life's paths will seem to have hit a dead-end.

There will be a natural tendency to blame everyone else and see them as the reason for your failures.

But Jesus will not let this man give in to this character flaw. He commands,

“Do you want to be healed? Then take responsibility for your life. Rise, take up your pallet and walk.”

Our Lord is a spiritual genius.

You will never go wrong in your pilgrimage by paying close attention to his insights.

Our Lord detects a great weakness in the center of this man's soul. Maybe you see it, too.

This man's dark secret is that he doesn't really believe that the waters can heal him.

This man doesn't believe in the center of his being that the water of Bethzatha will do him any good.

Yet, as long as he hangs around the pool he gives the appearance of wanting to be healed; he gives the appearance of holding to the hope that he'll get better.

As long as he hangs around the pool he poses as one who thinks change is possible.

But to commit to the water and find that nothing happens would be the crushing end of life.

To enter the water and not be healed would extinguish all hope.

At the core of his being this man has no faith in the divinely-disturbed waters.

My young friends, you must claim faith for your own life. You must claim faith for yourself.

Your relationship with God must be something genuine,

a relationship you can depend on in moments of triumph and moments of utter darkness.

This man pretends to have faith and hangs around the pool to appear that he is holding to hope, but Jesus can feel his emptiness and commands him,

“Rise, take up your pallet and walk. Claim the power of God for your own life.”

Then comes that electric moment when the man puts aside his internal paralysis

and trusts the command of Jesus, claiming the reality of God's power in his own life.

He believes in the power of Christ's transformation. . . he takes up his pallet . . . and he is healed.

There's one other verse to consider, for it sounds strange to us. Verse 14 says, “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “See, you are well! Sin no more than nothing worse befall you.”

Why would Jesus say such a thing? Is he implying that sin caused this man's paralysis?

No: he is making a statement about relationships:

he is saying that trust requires continuity of commitment.

He is saying to this man, ‘You have lived your life with an empty heart, with an empty soul,

with no real relationship with God. You have lived for thirty years without trusting in God's power.

Now it is time to trust in God's reality and reliability not just for a healing moment, but for a lifetime.”

In my office there is a faded word that I keep taped to my wall.

The word is Pertinacity! Pertinacity--the steadfast adherence to a course of action. Stick-to-it-tiveness.

Our Lord is saying to his man, 'Faith requires pertinacity; faith requires not just a moment of surety, not just a moment of clarity and ecstasy. Faith requires a lifetime of commitment to relationship with the divine.

Faith requires pertinacity. Genuine spiritual growth requires stick-to-it-tiveness.

Our Lord's point is this: if this man walks away from this moment without a meaningful relationship to God, he is not healed. He can walk, but he is not healed. He can walk, but he is not whole.

May your faith commitment be a friendship with God and an acknowledgement of God's Lordship that lasts for the whole of your days, a sustained and costly faithfulness.

The most enduring line Henry David Thoreau ever wrote was,

"The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." What was he saying?

He was stating the great truth that a host of people toil in jobs they don't enjoy,

live in relationships that don't fulfill them, struggle with character deficiencies they can't stand, shoulder responsibilities they can't fulfill, harbor ambitions they refuse to pursue.

Many find themselves in a state of paralysis --vocational, relational, personal, spiritual, emotional paralysis. Their lives become a toil to them.

May you never let this happen to the gift of your existence.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, which is why Christ's word comes to you,commanding, "Rise! Rise and walk in fullness of life!"

The climax of Glenn Cunningham's story comes when he pits himself against the best runners in the world.

The little boy who couldn't live, who couldn't walk, who couldn't run, rose on fire-scarred legs to set a world record in the mile of 4:06 in 1937.

The little boy who couldn't live, who couldn't walk, who couldn't run, came to astound the world as the finest trackman of his time.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.

But Jesus says to you, Rise!

Claim the power of faith for yourself.

Maximize the extraordinary talent and giftedness that God has bestowed upon each of you.

And by the power of God, may each of you

take your diploma and go into the world and do great things.

Equipped with the power and promise of God, I send you out.

Take up your dreams – and walk!

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High School Senior Sunday, June 4, 2006