

Do You Want to be Whole?

Isaiah 43:16-21; John 5:1-16

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

A Baptist preacher in an Episcopal church. As my saintly grandmother used to say, “Will miracles never cease!” If the walls begin to shake, it’s every person for himself! I do thank you for the inviting this Baptist preacher from the south to be part of your Lenten journey.

It seems like an odd question, doesn’t it? “Do you want to be made well?” Why, everybody wants to be well, don’t they?

It was actually a profoundly insightful question asked of an unnamed man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. The occasion was an unidentified Jewish festival, one of the three pilgrimage festivals. Devout Jews were expected to journey to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to observe these festivals. Being a devout Jew, Jesus made his journey to the holy city. Upon arrival, though, Jesus did not proceed to the Temple for worship, as one might expect. He did not seek out the sages for wise counsel. Instead he went to one of the public baths, a place called the Sheep Gate. There was a pool of water there believed to have healing properties. Imagine, if you can, a pool of healing waters in their day and time. Imagine all the sick people who must have gathered there—the blind, the lame, people with paralysis. You name it, it was likely around that pool. It must have looked like a cross between an unsanitary emergency room and a homeless shelter. All these desperate people gathered around the healing pool at the Sheep Gate hoping that its magical healing waters would flow over them.

It was at this pool that Jesus encountered the paralyzed man. Somehow John knew that the man had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. According to the book of Deuteronomy, that was also the length of time the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness. For thirty-eight long years this man had been paralyzed. After that length of time I suspect most people come to assume that that is their lot in life. This man was paralyzed and always would be. That was his wilderness, and he would live out his days there. All he could do, really, was wait beside the healing pool and hope a

miracle—until the day Jesus came to visit and asked him that seemingly odd question: “Do you want to be made well?”

We should be careful when reading this story that we’re not condescending toward this man. Our initial response is, “Why, sure he wants to be made well, Jesus. What kind of question is that? After thirty-eight long years, who wouldn’t want to be made well?” That’s easier to say from a safe distance away. It’s much harder when the questions are directed at us. They seem to have an obvious answer, but upon deeper reflection, they are quite difficult to answer.

Do you want to be free from your abusive spouse?

Don’t you want your wars to end?

You do welcome all people into your church, don’t you?

Do you want to be made well?

“Well, you see, it’s this way, Jesus. Unfortunately I have no one to put me into the water. When the water begins to swirl and the healing properties flow, someone always seems to jump in before I do.”

He didn’t say “yes,” did he? He was asked a direct question, yes or no—Do you want to be made well?—and he tossed back an excuse.

Sometimes over the years we learn to like our illnesses, don’t we? We’ve all had an Aunt So-in-So who was never better than when she was sick. The greeting, “How are you?” was not a greeting to her. It was an invitation to tell you all about her most recent maladies. And she could go into great detail, couldn’t she? Sometimes we learn how to use our illnesses to our advantage. We find a certain comfort in them. They may not be perfect, but they’re known. We may not be well, but at least we know what we’re dealing with. And besides, when you’re lying on a mat beside a healing pool, you’re relieved of a lot of responsibilities.

I remember a Paul Harvey story from many years ago. I was a young man then and incredulous when I heard this story. Paul Harvey told of a man had spent most of his adult life in prison. He was a model prisoner. He didn’t fight, talk back, or cause other problems. He got up in the morning

when he was told to get up. He performed his job as he was instructed. He ate his meals without complaining. And the reward for his good behavior was early release. It's what every prisoner longs for, right? However, this man had been in prison for so long, told what to do and when to do it for so many years, that he could not bear the burden of freedom. Paul Harvey said that he broke back into prison. He may not have been free, but at least he knew what he was dealing with.

“Do you want to be made well?” Jesus asked the man. After thirty-eight years beside that pool, Sir, do you want to emerge from this wilderness? “Well, you see, Jesus....”

Notice Jesus' response to the unnamed man. Jesus did not accept his excuse. Instead he gave him three imperatives. Rise! Take up your mat! Walk!

And he did. At once, the text says. The healing waters of the Sheep Gate pool never flowed over this man, but, even better, the healing call of Jesus did. The man was made well, and he rose to his feet. He took up his well-worn, familiar mat, and assumed a new burden, the burden of freedom.

It's a good story, isn't it? It's a good story for Lent because it reminds us that there is a burden associated with being free. Freedom demands responsibility. Being made well means that we must rise and walk. When you get out of prison, you have to get a job and start paying taxes. Being made well means that you're no longer served; you serve.

It is a profoundly insightful question, isn't it? Do you want to be made well?

The more I wrestled with this text, though, the more I came to believe that it's not just about a man being made well. It's about a man being made whole—physically, spiritually, socially whole. It's about a man who moved from helplessness to helping. He re-entered community filled with potential and opportunity. This man was delivered from his thirty-eight year wilderness in order to be a productive child of God—free from those things that held him down and responsible to serve God and others.

Did any of you see Dr. Sanjay Gupta's interview with Amiee Mullins this past weekend? Amiee is a remarkable woman. Tall. Long blond hair.

Absolutely the picture of health. She says that people tell her all the time, “You don’t look disabled.”

Amiee was born without fibula bones, which are the smaller of the two bones in our lower leg. At a year of age, her legs were amputated below the knees. You can imagine people’s expectations of a little girl growing up with that disadvantage. She was expected to use a wheelchair for the rest of her life.

Amiee Mullins is now a record-setting athlete, an actress, and a model. Currently she’s working on a screenplay. While a student at Georgetown University, Amiee pioneered the use of carbon-fiber prosthetic devices designed to imitate the hind legs of a cheetah. At the Paralympics in 1996, she set world records in several track events.

I listened to a speech she gave recently. She said that she was doing research for a magazine article she was writing and looked up the word “disabled” in a thesaurus. She was shocked by what she read:

Disabled, adj.: crippled, helpless, useless, wrecked, stalled, maimed, wounded, mangled, lame, mutilated, run down, worn-out, impotent, castrated, paralyzed....

She said that it was terribly disheartening. Her legs may have been amputated, but Amiee Mullins is not crippled or helpless or useless or wrecked or any of those adjectives. She is a powerful woman, an athlete, actress, and model. Despite her amputations, Amiee is a whole person.

Perhaps the man in our text was left unnamed because he bears all our names. And this seemingly odd question of our Lord is asked of each of us. Do you want to be made well? Do you want to leave your mat and contribute to the good of your family, your church, our city, the world? Hear the healing call of our Lord: rise, take up your mat, walk!