

Questions for Lent
#3 Do You Want To Be Made Well?

John 5: 1-15

One day a cowboy out in Arizona was riding down a trail. All of a sudden, as he rounded a bend, he saw an Indian lying down in the middle of the trail. He had his ear pressed close to the ground. As he got closer, the Indian began to speak **"Wagon,"** he said, **"drawn by two horses. Horses both dapple gray. Passengers in wagon. Two passengers. One man, one woman. Man driving."**

The cowboy was amazed. He just couldn't believe it. **"That's incredible, I can't believe it! You can tell all of that just by listening with your ear to the ground?"**

The Indian replied, **"No, they ran over me half an hour ago!"**

Most of us get flattened out in life from time to time. Something comes along -- some disease, some circumstance, some broken relationship, some loss -- something comes along that knocks us off our feet and sends us staggering through life.

The man in our Gospel lesson was flattened permanently, or so it seemed. There he was among a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed. We don't know precisely what was wrong with him -- but he had suffered his infirmity for thirty-eight years. He couldn't get up and walk -- he was on his pallet, waiting there beside the pool of healing water, hoping that someone would put him into the water when it began to stir and the healing power was there.

Did you note in the reading of the Scripture the occasion for Jesus being in Jerusalem? John says it was the Feast of the Jews. Had you been in Jerusalem at the time of that feast, where would you have expected to find Jesus? The common answer is in the Temple.

And if we were more reflective of what Jesus was about, we probably would have looked for Jesus right there where He was --at the Pool of Bethesda, by the sheep gate, because there all the sick people, the blind, the lame, the deaf gathered. It was there that Jesus was more likely to find someone needing His healing touch. And what more needy one could He choose for healing than this man who had been flattened for thirty eight years -- an invalid, always too late to reach the water when it stirred and its healing quality was present and active.

In this story is one of the most magnificent messages of the Christian faith. Not only is there power in Jesus to cleanse us from sin, but there is also power to heal us, and to free us from the chains that bind us.

At the center of the story is one of Jesus' questions that we are considering during this Lenten Season: **"Do you want to be made well?"** This is the wholeness question. In this question, there are two primary signals that speak to the issue of wholeness. Those signals are will and faith. Let's look at them.

I. First, WILL.

The first thing Jesus does is to challenge him to focus on His will. This is the harbor of our personhood -- our will. Our capacity to say yes and no. Our freedom to choose. So Jesus made a frontal attack: **"Do you want to be made well?"** This is question pierces to the very core of who we are -- it calls for a decision, an action, not the presence of a passive wish or vague desire, but an exercise of intentional will.

Do you remember that story of the leper coming to Jesus for healing? He said to Jesus, **"If you will, you can make me clean"**. [Mark 1:40 NIV] Jesus answered, **"of course I will. Be clean."**

The same Greek verb used there where Jesus said **"I will"** is used in this story of the man by the pool. Mark that down. God will never save any one of us against our will. Not only is that a significant question as it relates to our wholeness, it's a central theological question -- the matter of freedom. God will never save us against our will. Every person must say, "I will", to the Savior if they're to be the recipient of the grace that redeems.

In our story, every day an angel would come to the pool and stir up the water. It was when the water was stirring that it had healing power. Every day the water would be stirred, but the man couldn't get in. Jesus came not to stir the water, but to stir the man's will. Over those long years of being an invalid, long years of disappointment and apparent hopelessness, the man's will had been numbed. So Jesus addresses that critical point of who we are: Our will.

So much of our healing and wholeness -- spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational -- depends

upon will. **"Do you want to get well?"** is not only the question that relates to our physical well-being - It certainly also engages our relationships. You're not going to know wholeness in relationships until you INTENTIONALLY WILL to be whole in that relationship. That estrangement that is causing you to flirt with the possibility of divorce is not going to be resolved until the two of you make a decision that you want the marriage to be healed. Every couple that I counsel with before their wedding, I discuss with them what I call intentional love. I tell them that the love that enables a marriage to survive -- to be rich and rewarding -- the kind of love essential for THAT TO BE ACCOMPLISHED is intentional love. Every day in a marriage relationship, we must make a decision to love each other.

Well that is another entire sermon, so let me move on. The intentional exercise of our will is essential for wholeness and healing.

II. Before we go to the next signal that speaks to the issue of wholeness -- which is the signal of faith, let's take a little side path and consider a primary barrier to wholeness: **Our self pity.**

A friend told me about his little girl injuring her knee. Like most little girls, she came to her momma and daddy to show them the full extent of her injury. After taking the time to bandage it and soothe her pain, they sent her on her way to play. Some hours later they found her in her bedroom, crying. Her father was concerned and questioned her if her knee was still hurting. **"No,"** she sobbed, **"but when I hurt it, you and Mommy didn't feel sorry enough for me, so now I'm crying for myself!"**

Sort of sounds like the man in our Scriptural story doesn't it? He must have been gripped by self-pity: Did you catch his reply to Jesus? ***"I don't have anybody to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up. While I'm trying to get in, others step down before me and get in the pool and there is no place for me."***

Self-pity is a barrier to wholeness.

There are real possibilities here that the reason this man had never been healed is that he really didn't want to be healed. I think that is suggested by Jesus asking the question, "Do you **WANT** to be healed?"

Did Jesus know that the man enjoyed and was comfortable being sick? I believe He did. In its

extreme, self-pity becomes destructive causing us to become neurotic and paranoid. We begin to see all things as a plot to destroy us. We feel that everyone is out to do us in, to hurt us.

If we mire ourselves in the mud of self-pity, we will remain bound and paralyzed and life will pass us by.

Let me mention something that is akin to self-pity that I see as a very common malady and another barrier to wholeness: cynicism.

I confess that it's very easy to become cynical, and that some degree of cynicism may be healthy. When hundreds of our representatives and senators bounce countless checks and live high off of the insufficient funds, and suffer no consequence for their illegal behavior, we wonder why we should even take the time to vote?

YES, it's easy to become cynical, but friends, cynicism is crippling. It, too, can become a cop out on personal responsibility --a barrier to our wholeness.

As difficult as it is, we must never allow the lowest common denominator to set the measure of how it should be and how it might be.

No matter how common immorality, or irresponsibility, or blatant self serving may be, in the public arena; no matter how strong and evasive evil may appear with "wrong on the throng", wearing the crown arrogantly, you and I must guard against cynicism.

Along with self-pity, it's a great barrier to wholeness and healing.

III. Let's move back now to our focus -- signals that speak to the issue of wholeness. The first was **will**; we must want to be whole. The second is **faith**. There is no healing, no wholeness apart from faith.

In his first epistle, John wrote, ***"This is the victory that overcomes the world -- even our faith"***.

[I John 5:4 NIV]

Going back to our Gospel lesson. Notice the movement that Jesus orchestrated in the life of that man. **FIRST**, he asked him if he wanted to be made whole. He wanted to stir up the man's will. **NEXT**, he called on the man's faith: ***"Rise, take up your bed, and walk"***. I find it very significant that

Jesus didn't give the man's faith any outward assistance. He simply called it forth. He didn't take him by the hand and lift him up; He commanded him to get up. When the man obeyed -- when he acted in faith -- he discovered a new strength. In fact, Scripture says, ***"Immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked"***.

Now let me be quick to say that faith does not always bring healing in terms of physical and emotional cure for our maladies. It's evident as we look around us that some folks are healed by faith, and others are not. It happens with me all the time. I pray with and for people for healing, and healing takes place. I pray for and with other people for healing and I hold their funerals. A mystery surrounds it all.

Here's the point – just because some people are not physically and emotionally healed from the particular malady that has them in its grip when we pray for them, does not nullify the place of faith. Even when we are physically ill, even when we may be experiencing emotional distress we can know wholeness. And faith is the key.

Christine Kane wrote, **"I am convinced that commitment to anything reveals everything. But it reveals it in very tiny doses and steps. That brings me to the good news: when you commit to healing, when you set your intent, when you pray in whatever tiny way you can, the door does open. Grace happens. The bad news is this: The door opens gradually. At first, imperceptibly. This news is like a prison sentence for someone with an illness, addiction or depression, they want it DONE. They want to either have it OVER WITH or NOT DO IT at all...which is precisely why the spiritual direction that they necessarily must go through involves learning how to live in process, progress, gratitude and presence."**

Like a caterpillar, that God will change into a butterfly. Healing is not just about the body or the mind or the emotions. It's about the soul. It's about washing away all the residue of failure and disobedience, so we can see ourselves and God clearer.

The desire to be whole -- and the faith that God can heal you are the keys to being healed.

You need to decide to heal. Moreover, you then need to remind yourself again the next morning

that you decided. And the next. Tell your voices their days are numbered. Decide today to heal. Pray. And do that every day. Trust me on this. You have no idea now how powerful your will aligned with your faith can be in your life until you decide to do it.

Do YOU want to be made well?