

Healing Capacity

Readings: John 5:1-9
Excerpt from *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson

Today's lesson comes from early in the gospel of John, from a time when Jesus is meeting a wide variety of folk and inviting them to claim the divine wholeness imprinted within them. Folk like Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, and a gentile child. And this man at the pool of Beth-zatha, near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem.

My text for the sermon is the question Jesus asks that unnamed man, lying under those five porticoes, "Do you want to be made well?" But let's not start there, because the man's answer to that question has a context...a long context. A 38-year context. That's what it says, "One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years." I like to just pause and give you a chance to get your heads around that: he had been there for 38 years.

There's a lot of identity in 38 years of being ill or disabled or paralyzed. Imagine this community of unwanted outsiders who are together, day after day. Most of them will *never* leave. How can they? Their illness or blindness, their lameness or paralysis, is proof that there is something so wrong with them that God is punishing them right out loud, where everyone can see. So, they really only have each other...and the mountain of their accumulated sins piled up in the corners to keep them company.

That's a powerful identity. In fact, it's a paralyzing identity.

The paralyzing belief of the women and men we're talking about is that until they get right with God for something they may not even know they've done, they are going to stay right there — on the fringes of the community, dependent on others to bring them a little food, perhaps to pray for them, but largely to avoid them because they are, after all, unclean. And one man was there who had been there for 38 years — for 38 years — before this strange encounter on the sabbath with this odd rabbi from Galilee.

And Jesus asks him, "Do you want to be made well?"

And in case you are sitting there thinking the answer is a foregone conclusion, I invite you to think again. I invite you to think about yourself. I invite you to think about your wounds, your angers, your despair, your mistakes. I invite you to think about how easy it is to build an identity out of personal failure; a small, comfortable identity that doesn't ask too much of us.

So just stop right now and think about how much of your identity rests on something that makes you wince, or raises your blood pressure, or starts the tears welling up, or causes you to flush with shame when you remember it. If you can't think of one, here's one of mine: eight years into my first marriage, my husband left me. We did not decide together that we were incompatible; in fact, I got no chance to say anything at all before he had changed the locks on our apartment. He left me and he told me why: I was not good enough or loving enough to be an acceptable spouse. And, there was nothing I could do to make it better.

It took me almost a decade to let go of that identity, to stop defining myself as a woman who could expect that at some totally unpredictable time, I would be abandoned...again. It was a built-in, hard-wired default position. Ring any bells? Sound like anything that a might have happened to you? Like, say, you were the “pretty one” in your family — meaning you *weren't* the smart one or the athletic one? Or you were the student your school choral director told to mouth the words, so ever since you have defined yourself as someone who “can't sing”? Or you gave your child up for adoption when you were a 14-year old, out of wedlock mother? Or you got your girlfriend pregnant and then walked away? Or...

“Do you want to be made well?”

Do you? Do *we*? Listen again: “Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate; our worst fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.”

Are we so paralyzed by the mistakes, so deeply invested (38 years for the man by the pool of Bethzatha; that's a big investment) in the brokenness, the shame, the conflict, the anger, the abandonment, of our past, that we cannot imagine who we would be without that identity?

“Do we want to be made well?” Do we — *we*, the gathered covenant community, the servant people of God of First Plymouth Congregational Church, United Church of Christ of Englewood, CO? Do we want to let go of the inadequacy, the shame, the fear, that feels so familiar, and instead to live into the power?

This is not a rhetorical query: this is a question about dying to one identity and being born again as something else — that is why this story is here in the season after Easter, when we are again reminded that we are a resurrection people who have a pretty substantive choice to make about whether we want to define ourselves by blessing...or by curse. So here is the choice in a nutshell:

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 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?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone steps in ahead of me.” And Jesus said to him...

...Jesus said to him, “Stand up...and walk.”

Jesus said, “Yup, heard the excuse. I understand that you are caught in this cycle of shame, fear, hopelessness, grief, whatever. And that burden you keep hanging onto means you can't move fast enough to get into that pool and be healed while the water is all stirred up by the Holy Spirit. Got it. But there is only one way for it ever to be different: you need to believe you can be different. So let's start right now: stand up and walk.”

“Do we want to be made well?” There is only one way for it ever to be different. We need to believe we can be different and then to stand up and walk away from the illusion of

helplessness or fear, or loss, or anxiety. And to walk straight into the potential and the promise without looking back.

In January, the news that we – we – had finally used up all the financial reserves left us by past generations was enough to snap a lot of us out of our apathy. When the dust had (more or less) settled, most of us were aware that we had — for years — been content with “playing small.” For years (right around 38 of them if we look back —), we had been cutting essential programs and shrinking, eliminating less-essential staff and shrinking. Yes, we had complained, “There is no one to put me in the pool.” But in January we plumb ran out of acceptable options. We needed to do something pretty drastic just to keep going, just to keep the doors open.

“Do we want to be made well?” Do we? Because the decision is ours, right here, right now; one of the most meaningful decisions many of us will ever make. And here is the decision: do we want to stop giving and accepting leftovers and claim our *real* capacity as a covenant people, that amazing, extraordinary, spectacular, light-filled, life-giving capacity “to make manifest the glory of God within us”?

Are we content to lie paralyzed beside the pool at Beth-zatha until we die...or do we want to “be liberated from our fear”? That is our choice, my sisters and brothers. If we want to live, it will take the commitment of every single one of us. Not 25% of us; not 50% of us; not even 70% of us. It will take the holy and whole-hearted commitment of every single one of us. Because “playing small and shrinking doesn’t serve the world” and we are here to serve the world...every single one of us, all 100% of us. You may think that would take a miracle. Isn’t it good, then, that this story tells us miracles really do happen. They happen every day when somewhere, someone believes...and stands up and walks toward real life.

Last week, we began our Fiscal 2011 Stewardship Campaign. Next Sunday it will end and we will all know whether First Plymouth Church will live. Because that is the decision that we are each making when we fill out our financial commitment card reflecting the depth and breadth of our true capacity...or we hold back.

Let me say that again: We are not merely deciding whether we want to be well, we are deciding whether we want to live at all.

I have excuses; you do; we all have excuses. Like the man Jesus spoke to by the pool any one of us can find a good reason (or two or three) to do nothing; to say, No; to remain paralyzed in an old identity, an old capacity, our old fear. But we also have the best reason in the world to be generous, to be abundant, to live with hope and joy and grace in spite of fear: we have this beloved community to empower and bless, we have each other to empower and bless.

George and I have chosen; we have chosen to cast our lot with you, the people with whom we are in covenant. We have chosen to join with the most generous among us, those who are willing to live into their full capacity for light and life, by committing 10% of our household income to this congregation because we believe in the miracles we can create together, because we believe that First Plymouth Church can be “brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous.”

And Jesus asked him, “Do you want to be well?” Then Jesus said, “Then stand up...and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his sleeping mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.”

May it be so for us.

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