

Intimacy - Into-Me-See  
‘Do You Want To Be Healed?’ ”  
John 5:2-9

See if you can picture the scene that we just read from the story of Jesus. In the middle of the big city, Jerusalem, there was a big pool, fed by an underground spring. Legend said that every once in a while an angel would come and stir up the waters in the pool; and when that happened, the first person to get into the water would be healed. It seemed like a magical place, a place where God might touch you if you were able to get into good position. If you were a little more skeptical, you could think of it as a kind of healing lottery, where in an instant, your sickness or your disability might be instantly cured. Of course people would come there, right?

But because the angel didn't visit the waters all that often, and there was no published schedule for the miracles, people gathered around the pool and waited. Hundreds? Thousands? Who knows. But enough that someone had built porches all around the pool, so that the blind and paralyzed people who waited there had some shelter from the sun and wind.

The man in our story was one of the people who rested there in the shade, waiting for the waters to bubble up, for the angel of healing to arrive. Thirty-eight years he'd spent by the side of that pool. He had a mat that he laid on, and I imagine that he'd accumulated a bunch of other stuff too: eating utensils, a change or two of clothes, a blanket for cold nights. He had friends, people he'd gotten to know while he'd been there. They came and went; maybe some of them got healed; no doubt some of them gave up and moved on. It wasn't exactly home, but for this man it wasn't so bad. He had gotten comfortable there. He never got to the water, and in fact he'd sort of stopped trying; but what he'd found instead was a sort of support group for people who were as unfortunate as he was; people who, just like him, had no hope, and lots of stories to share about the unfairness of life.

And then one day Jesus showed up. Jesus was known as a healer, and there were many people there that day who needed to be healed. We don't know whether Jesus stopped and talked with any of those other blind or lame or sick people; but it's hard to imagine that he didn't heal at least some of them. That's who he was. But the story John wants us to hear about Jesus is this one, about Jesus' conversation with this man who had been in residence near the pool for the last thirty-eight years.

Jesus must have seen past the surface of this guy's posture, right into his heart, because he asked the man a question that otherwise would seem kind of insensitive. ‘Do you want to be healed?’ he asked. ‘Do you want to be made well?’ ”

And what you have to notice first in the story is that the man doesn't answer the question. Instead, he starts right into a litany of why he hasn't been healed before now, and why he can't actually get better. Well, he says, look at me: I'm paralyzed. When the waters stir, I don't have anyone to help me. None of my family or friends have been willing to wait here with me. And when I try to make my way to the pool on my own, other people get in the way—how rude is

that? So of course I can't get there in time to be the first one in the pool. And..and..and...No doubt he had rehearsed this speech before.

He never answered Jesus' question. He probably never even heard Jesus' question, because he was so firmly fixed on what was in between him and that pool. There's a healer standing in front of him, and the guy looks right at Jesus and thinks, "You're not going to carry me into that pool either, are you?" In his mind, there was only one way for healing to happen. If someone came along to save him, it was going to have to be someone fast enough and strong enough to run right over those other sick people and get him into the water first.

I don't know anything about the condition this guy suffered from for those thirty-eight years. Maybe he was legitimately ill. But it does seem that this story is different from the other healing stories in the Gospels. Jesus doesn't touch him or speak gently or say, "I heal you." He says, "Stand up. Take your mat and walk." In other words: Stop waiting for someone else to carry you. Stop waiting for other people to get out of your way. Jesus saw right into him. For you, Jesus was saying to this man, the problem is not in your legs. It's in your mind and your heart.

This is not a story about healing this man's body. It's a story about healing the sickness in his soul.

No doubt I have mentioned to you before that I spent quite a few years as an unhappy lawyer. For almost the whole fifteen years I practiced law, I would cycle through times when I was sure I could not do this job one more week. I had a whole litany of complaints: I didn't like fighting with people for a living; I didn't feel like I was helping anyone; I was stuck. I took classes on alternative careers for lawyers; I read books with titles like *Follow Your Bliss, and Do What You Love; the Money Will Follow*. Mostly I thrashed around, unhappy, discontent. I wasn't sure what a better life would look like, so I couldn't just make a change, right? And of course I talked about my unhappiness. Probably even more incessantly and annoyingly than I remember.

What I do remember is one night in the kitchen of the house we lived in, my husband and daughter and I. I remember exactly: Terry and I were standing against different counters, and we were each talking about our days at work. I had launched into what I'm sure was a familiar refrain about wishing I had a different career. And in a moment that has stayed with me these 20 years since then, Terry looked right at me and said, "Stop obsessing."

The voice of God does not always come to us gently. Oh. OK, I thought. I can do that.

With just those two words—which Terry probably said out of frustration more than compassion—I heard what I needed to hear at that moment. It was like a little kick that dislodged me from the place I had gotten stuck. For a while, at least, I actually did stop worrying, turning over and over in my mind a situation that I couldn't change in that moment. It's not like a whole beautiful future laid itself out in front of me—I had no idea how the circumstances of my life would conspire eventually to send me in a different direction. But for the moment at least, I was free to stand up and stop wallowing in my unhappiness.

I know what a privileged problem it was that I had let consume me. Who really cares about a lawyer who can't find job satisfaction, when there are people all over the world who really are

unable to move—out of their hunger, or the only job that is feeding their family, or the war zone or refugee camp or prison where they are confined. There are many people whose illness or addiction or poverty locks them into darkness that only the miracle of healing can break through.

But I wonder if there isn't some part of most of us that is more like the guy by the side of the pool. Needing, maybe as much as healing itself, someone who can see that we've gotten comfortable in our discomfort. Someone who will dig down underneath the speeches we have prepared about why nothing can change, to see that being responsible—response-able—has become even more frightening than our illness, or our loneliness, or our worry or our sadness. Someone who will see the truth of our lives and ask us that hard question: "Do you want to be made well?"

It turns out that the guy by the pool could walk even when he couldn't answer the question Jesus asked him. The truth is, he hadn't been sure he wanted to be well. Even his hope for his body to be whole had gotten buried under all those years of watching for the miracle in the water. The truth in Jesus' question set him free—not because he understood it completely or because he rethought his theology of healing, but because Jesus wanted healing for him.

This is what Jesus does: Sees us as we really are. Offers us the truth. Takes what is most broken inside of us and holds it up until our eyes see it differently. Loves us—sometimes even with words that sound harsh—into wholeness.

Healing may not look like what we thought it was supposed to be. Maybe the healing we need most isn't about the magical water all. Maybe in some way it is possible for our spirits to stand up, pick up our mats, and walk—even in the places that we have long thought of next to the words, "I can't."

What is that place for you? Whatever it is that you are sick and tired of—whether it's your body or a stubbornly hard relationship or a dis-ease deep down in your soul; no matter how many people and obstacles stand in between you and what was supposed to be the healing pool—maybe today someone is standing in front of you, asking, "Do you want to be made well?" And whatever your answer is, even if you can't answer at all, maybe today the One who can see right into you is saying, "Come. Pick up your mat. Leave all that other stuff; you don't need it. Be free."