

## *A Most Unusual Question*

John 5.1-9

May 9, 2010

The healing gift of God brings a new identity, new freedom, and new responsibilities... Whether anyone wants to accept this joyful/frightening offer is indeed a real question.

- Fred Craddock

### *The Reading*

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. <sup>3</sup>In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed. <sup>5</sup>One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup>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?’ <sup>7</sup>The sick man answered him, ‘Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.’ <sup>8</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’ <sup>9</sup>At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

One of the most beloved traditional prayer forms of Christian spiritual practice is *Lectio Divina*, which is Latin for sacred reading. This prayer form is used in many ways, but all represent some variation on the repetitive reading of a short passage for the purpose of listening for the voice of the passage itself, and for the word or phrase that raises questions or offers fresh meaning. I needed no repetition of John 5.1-9 to recognize a phrase that jumped up and grabbed me, raising significant questions. To be honest, there were several to choose from. There is a question, for example concerning the number of pools at the location described by John. There are several variants in the early manuscripts of this passage, and some of them indicate that there were two pools. We can dismiss this problem, however, because archeologists have found this pool, and it bears the name Bethesda; that’s right, like Bethesda, MD., which was named after the pool. The pool in question was large, and contained

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five porticos - five porches - under which the ill, paralyzed, or lame would lay seeking healing. But this is not the phrase that jumped up and grabbed my attention.

There is also some question about the healing power of the swirling waters. The disabled man mentions to Jesus that he's never been healed because when the waters were stirred up he had no one to help him into the water. There was, you see, a folk legend associated with this pool; it was said that an angel would descend into the pool from time to time and stir up the waters, providing healing for the lucky person who could be first into the pool. But, again, this is not what jumped up and grabbed my attention.

Nor was it the statement that the man had been beside the pool regularly for thirty eight years. Can you imagine? Thirty eight years. Some think this number is symbolic of the wilderness wanderings of the ancient Hebrews after their release from Egypt. However this may be, the man had been by the pool hoping and waiting for a long and fruitless time. I have pity for his situation, but his situation didn't grab me.

If you care to know; I was struck by the question Jesus poses to the man. A simple question, to be sure, "Do you want to be made well?" but in this context it seems out of place, superfluous, a statement of the clearly obvious. Well, of course, a man who has waited for thirty eight years for healing would want to be made well! Upon reflection, however, it occurs to me that Jesus is not posing such a simple, straightforward question; rather, he is posing a more penetrating question; he is asking the man if he is ready for the consequences of being healed. He is asking if he is ready to take up the life that would be his in the aftermath of healing.

You may think this question superfluous as well. Why wouldn't the man look forward to walking again, going where he pleased when he pleased, and becoming a fruitful member of his family and his community? Why wouldn't he welcome such consequences; indeed, look forward to them?

He would of course welcome such consequences. But Jesus refers to the spiritual and personal consequences of God's healing gift. God's gift of healing, as Fred Craddock has pointed out, brings with it several consequences; beginning with a *new identity* altogether. This man who has been known as invalid, beggar, a drain on society with no capacity for

contribution, will suddenly become Peter, Nathaniel, or whatever his given name is; capable of making a unique contribution to society, and expected to do just that. And God's gift of healing results in *new freedom*. Not simply the ability to take up his mat and walk away; but rather the spiritual freedom to pass along the blessing he has received from God. God's blessing, God's healing, is never an end in itself. God fully expects blessing to produce the blessing of others; God fully expects healing to produce healing in the lives of others. God blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others; God heals us so that we can offer healing to others.

God's gift of healing results in new identity, new freedom, and – finally - *new responsibilities*. Once our invalid friend is released from his affliction, he will be expected to exercise his new freedom and “pay it forward.” He will be expected to take up the mantle of healer himself. And the same is true for us. Once we are released from that which binds us – illness, disease, loneliness, fear, addiction, and more – once we are free, we will be expected to share in the ministry of Christ. The bar of expectation is raised significantly for our lives, and God fully expects us to produce.

Perhaps Craddock is right; perhaps it is a real question whether anybody would want such healing; such a gift that brings with it new identity, new freedom, and new responsibilities. Sometimes, I think, it's a lot easier to remain ill, bound, or entrapped. After all, we at least understand our affliction, and this condition is preferable to an unknown freedom that beacons to us. Besides, it's easier to remain a victim – poor, pitiable me seeking the pity and good will of others - than to face our fears, stand up in courage, and move forward in faith. It's easier to resent those who have injured us – “how dare they treat me this way!” - than to stand up and seek reconciliation with those who have victimized us. It's easier to wallow in that sense of victimhood than it is to give it over to God and to let God offer healing and wholeness.

Many times, it would seem, we don't receive healing from God because we don't really want it. But it doesn't have to be that way. Like the invalid in John's gospel, we have a choice. We can accept God's gift of healing, and with it new identity, new freedom, and new responsibilities. We don't have to remain bound to the addictions, estrangements, loneliness, or isolation that can squeeze the life out of our spirits. We can give ourselves to God for healing, and in its wake begin to see how God wants us to use our new identity and freedom.