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Sacraments and Sacred Moments:
“HEALING AND WHOLENESS”

John 5:2-9

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Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethesda, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. 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 into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, as he took up his mat and began to walk. (John 5:2-9 NRSV)

Healing?

Three weeks ago, I went to my primary care physician for my annual physical. The good news: I am relatively healthy (for a 58-year-old). My cholesterol is a bit high. But so is my brother’s and my sister’s. It’s a family thing.

Do you know what last Sunday was? Yep, it was the third Sunday in July. Which is National Ice Cream Day, first designated as such with a proclamation signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1984.

High cholesterol. National Ice Cream Day.

Last Sunday, to celebrate National Ice Cream Day, Whole Foods had a special on ice cream.... ice cream!...Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream. Pints of Ben and Jerry’s (my favorite flavor is Half Baked) were just \$3. Three dollars!

High cholesterol. National Ice Cream Day.

I was good. I only bought two. And I didn’t finish both until Tuesday night. Which was important, because do you know what Wednesday was? National Hot Dog Day.



Which brings us to today's sermon topic: Health.

We are continuing our sermon series in which we are looking at *Sacraments and Sacred Moments*. Today's focus is healing prayers and anointing of the sick; health and wellness. The Old Testament includes story after story of God's healing work. In the New Testament, more than 700 verses across the four gospels deal with some type of healing, including resurrection of the dead. Restoring people to health—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual—was a key component of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Jesus' commission to the disciples included healing. From Luke, chapter 9:

*Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God **and to heal**.*" (Luke 9:1-2)

In the letter of James, we find this instruction to the church to engage in ministries of healing:

Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:14)

Healing is a ministry that we share. It is something that we do. Yes. Us. Healing. It's not just for the Pentecostals. It's not just for the T.V. preachers. Healing is a part of what we do.

But how? What does healing look like? What does it involve?

For direction, we look to our gospel text for today.



The setting for the story is the pool of Bethesda. Healing baths and spas were common in the Roman world; the pool was likely associated with one of the many healing temples dedicated to the Greek god of medicine that existed in and around Jerusalem.

John tells us that there was a multitude in need of healing who were lingering, laying by the pool. In John's account of Jesus' visit to this site, he reports that Jesus' attention was drawn to one individual, who had lain in a state of paralysis for 38 years.

That Jesus took note of an individual—that he did not simply see a class of people, a multitude of invalids, but recognized a person—has been called a miracle within this miracle story. Jesus did not walk past; he stopped. He did not see a group. He saw an individual, a person. And he made a choice not to stand aloof from that person's pain. The healing that follows starts with a love that sees, that stops, that cares. When we are dis-eased—broken, ill—this may be the greatest need we have: to be treated with care, seen as individuals, treated like human beings.

In John's telling of this story, he holds nothing back in his naming of the conditions from which the man recognized by Jesus suffered. Blind. Lame. Paralyzed. Ill for 38 years.

John names what troubles this person. In scripture, descriptive names for health conditions hold spiritual connotations. Physical dysfunction in biblical stories often suggests spiritual illness. Body, mind and soul are one, and the dis-ease in one impacts the other. We are more and more understanding how true this is.

Naming what troubles us—naming our places of suffering, our brokenness—is always the first step toward transformation. That's why the first of the twelve steps for Alcoholic Anonymous is: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol...that our lives had become unmanageable."

If we won't name it, if we don't own it, then it can't be healed.

Jesus saw a person, an individual—not a group, not a condition, but a human person. And then, Jesus asked a question:

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, Jesus said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6)

Do you want to be made well?

Are you familiar with the idiom that refers to a person "enjoying ill health"? A sense of powerlessness often leads to paralysis. When we can't picture an alternative reality, there is no motivation to move towards it. We can't ask for what we can't imagine.

This is why the stories of recovery shared around the circle are such a powerful part of 12 step meetings. This is why it is important for us to tell our own stories, because our stories—our stories of God's work in our lives—can help others imagine a different reality from that in which they feel trapped.

Do you want to get well? *Do you want to get well?*

Many of us—I fear it is too many of us—choose to linger in and live with the pain of staying the same, resigning ourselves to the status quo, rather than taking steps, however small, however tentative they may be, towards healing and health.

Do you want to get well? The person by the pool of whom Jesus asked this question had excuses. "I have no one to help me. While I am trying to get in, someone else steps down ahead of me..." I don't have time. I'm too old. I'm too young. I can't afford to. The ice cream tastes so very good. I've tried before and failed.

Like the invalid by the pool, we learn to become comfortable in our unhealthiness. But Jesus does not want to leave us there!

Jesus said to the invalid in the pool: "Rise, take up your pallet, and walk." Get up. Pick up. Walk.



In his book *Made for a Miracle*¹, Pastor Michael Slaughter, makes a distinction between magic and miracles. Jesus is not in the magic business, but the miracle business. And every miracle has two components, divine intervention *and* human initiative.

The Red Sea parted...when Moses raised his staff and God parted the seas. The five thousand were fed...when one small boy shared his lunch and Jesus blessed it. Lazarus was restored to life...after Jesus called him from the tomb and the community removed the death clothes that bound him.

Every miracle has two components: divine action and human responsibility.

Jesus says to the invalid laying by the pool: “Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.” Get up. Pick up. Walk. The healing miracle occurs when these words intersects with faith-filled action. Healing happens when the one who has been powerless believes, and gets up, and picks up, and walks.

Healing—healing miracles—has two components: divine action *and* human responsibility.

Whether it be in a recovering addict’s acknowledgment of a higher power, or a surgeon’s confession that what she can do is beyond what she can explain, or the therapist who leaves room for silence and the Spirit’s movement to be part of healing, I believe the divine, the holy, works on our behalf for healing and wholeness.

God sees. God knows our need. God is not aloof. To quote retired Garrett professor and liturgical theologian Ruth Duck: “Healing is the transformation that may occur when humans encounter God at the point of their need.” (Duck 235)

I believe the divine, the holy, works on our behalf for healing and wholeness. *And* I believe we have human responsibility that we must assume for our own wellness and health.

Get up. Pick up. Walk.

Getting up is an intentional, physical action. The person in our gospel for today had been in the same state for 38 years. Getting up for most of us may mean doing something that our bodies are not in the habit of doing, or at least not doing regularly.

Get up. Pick up. Walk. According to the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention), adults should engage in at least 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity aerobic activity like brisk walking and do some sort of muscle strengthening activity at least twice a week.² According to a host of studies, less than one in four of us meets this standard.

Multiple times a week, completing an exercise regimen that includes multiple sets of chest presses, leg extensions, pulldowns, chest flies (I am not even sure what those are), overhead triceps presses, pushups, and planks—the workout that two-time cancer survivor, 85-year-old

Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg does—may not be for everyone, but we can all do something.³ (I do want it noted that I have referred to both President Reagan and Justice Ginsburg in the same sermon.) The same CDC recommendation that mentions 150 minutes per week of activity states that increments of activity for as little as 10 minutes at a time can make a positive impact.

Healing, wholeness, health is God’s intention for us. Prayer. Anointing. Opening ourselves to the power of God at work on our behalf is a part of healing. And so too is human responsibility. Get up. Pick up. Walk.



Healing is body, mind and spirit. And just as physical health requires both divine intervention and human responsibility, so too does mental and spiritual health. Spiritually and mentally, as well as physically, we need to get up, pick up, and walk.

We need to honestly acknowledge and name how it is with our spirits, our souls. We need to engage in spiritual disciplines. We need to get up, pick up, and get to a small group for prayer, for study, for spiritual health.

Good mental health is as important as good spiritual health and good physical health. And if we are going to ask people to honestly name their needs, their emotional brokenness, then we need to provide support and care. Divine intervention, yes. And the support and care and resources so that human responsibility, the work of healing mind and spirit, can be done.



Two final points: **When we talk about healing and wellness, we need to recognize that God has created us with differing abilities.** Too often, well-intended people suggest that a person with an easily identifiable disability go to a healing service to receive the ability to see, walk or speak. Then if the person refuses to attend the service, or if a “cure” does not happen, the assumption is made that the reason a person has abilities unlike those others enjoy is a consequence of too little faith or too much sin, which adds insult to the challenges life may already present.

The alternative is that which Jesus models. Ask those whose abilities differ from yours what they desire—perhaps it is barrier-free access to the meeting room or more affordable, better health care. (The story is told that a young girl who was deaf was asked if in heaven she would regain her hearing. She answered, “No, in heaven, everyone will sign.”) What we regard as a limitation may be central to how God works through someone. When we talk about healing and wellness, we need to recognize that God has created us with differing abilities. (Duck 236)

Like Jesus, who asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” (Mark 10:46–52), we need to offer abundant respect, listening, and compassionate action in response to a person’s actual desires and needs.



And this: death is not a failure of healing. Ten years ago, my oldest sister was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer. She had two major surgeries. She underwent multiple rounds of chemotherapy. Prayers were plentiful. God was present. She had an amazing community of care and love. And throughout the journey she got up, picked up, and walked.

Following her diagnosis and first surgery, she completed multiple triathlons, she participated in bicycle tours, including a Pedal Across Lower Michigan that she did with her dad, her youngest brother (me), and her nieces (my daughters). And seven years ago this month, three years after her diagnosis—when she was just 58, the age I am now—my sister died.

Pain. Brokenness. Yes. And healing. In our experience of God’s presence in the midst of brokenness. In the amazing community of love that cared for her and her family. In the hope and optimism that she carried with her.

Grief. Pain. Loss. Yes. And healing. The experience of a God who is with us in life, in death, and in life beyond death. The experience of a community—people who act, providing support, care, silent companionship in times when words are not adequate. Divine and human action intersecting. Healing. Yes. Even through death and grief.



This is the good news: Healing, wholeness, health—of body, mind and spirit—is God’s good intention for us.

Church, healing is a ministry that we share.

Healing is part of what we do. Yes. Us. Healing. It’s not just for the Pentecostals. It’s not just for the T.V. preachers. Healing is a part of what we do.

Prayer. Anointing. Opening ourselves to the power of God at work on our behalf is a part of healing. And, encouraging human responsibility: Getting up. Picking up. Walking. Healing is a part of what we do.



The Invitation to Healing Prayer and Anointing

*Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me...
Melt me, mold, fill me.*

I invite you to breathe in God's presence, to center yourself in God's love.

As you open yourself to God, know that God knows your need.

Hear these words from the letter of James 5:14:

Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.

Where do you need God's healing—be it in body, mind or spirit? It may be emotional. It may be relational. It may be physical. It may be a habit you are seeking to overcome. It may simply be a dullness of mind or spirit, a being stuck, an area of your life in need of revival.

Hear Jesus' words: *Do you want to be healed?*

I invite you now to join me in praying together the unison prayer blessing the oil:

The Unison Blessing of the Oil (Ruth Duck)

Holy Source of life and healing, we give you thanks for the gift of oil, sign of your Spirit's power within and among us. We thank you for Jesus, your anointed one, who healed the sick, raised the dead, brought good news to the poor, and proclaimed the year of your favor. Anoint us now by your grace, that we may receive the healing and peace you intend for us, and so be renewed to be your people in the world: through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Pastor Elbert and Pastor Suzanne are at the altar rail. They will be here during our closing hymn to offer individual healing prayer and anointing with those of you who desire either or both. They will also be here beyond our hymn as there is need. When you come forward and they ask you what your need is, you can name your need, or if you prefer to keep it between you and God, simply say, "God knows," because God does...

As the Spirit moves, come now to experience God's care, God's healing, God's wellness and wholeness which is God's intention for you.

The Hymn of Dedication No. 378: "Amazing Grace"

¹ The analysis of John 5:2-9 contained in this sermon relies heavily on the treatment of this text found in Chapter 6 (*Activate Health and Healing*) of this book by Slaughter.

² www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/index.html

³ <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/Wellness/workout-supreme-court-justice-ruth-bader-ginsburg/story?id=50546669>

Bibliography

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