

Sermon for Easter VI Year C 2019
Do I Want to Be Made Well?

Thirty-eight years is an awfully long time to be lying on a mat!
Just imagine every day is the same.

Waiting.

Watching.

Hoping.

Not much changes.

Sitting on his mat has become a way of life for the man who encounters
Jesus in today's gospel lesson.

His life is stagnant.

And the stagnancy of his life is made all the more apparent and poignant
by the stirred-up waters he's been lying beside
and trying to make his way into.

Alas, someone always "beats him to it"—

because it's only the first person who steps into the pool
after an angel stirs up the water who receives healing.

And then, one day, here comes Jesus among the many invalids
who spend their days laying by the Beth-zatha pool.

And what does Jesus say to this man that
Jesus knew had been there a long time?

If you've spent any time reading the gospels,
then you know that Jesus asks in-your-face questions.

Do you love me?

Why are you so afraid?

Are you also going to leave?

How long shall I put up with you?

Do you still not understand?

But the question he asks in today's gospel story
might be the most jarring of all.

The setting is, in a sense, like Jesus visiting an outdoor nursing home.

Jesus finds our long-suffering man lying poolside
and approaches him and asks,
“Do you want to be made well?”
No small talk.
No sermon.
Just a question—
and—is it just me—or is this an uncomfortable-making question?
How would you feel
if you were unwell for close to four decades,
and a stranger came along one day
and asked if you really wanted to get better?
Implying that you were somehow invested in your brokenness,
that you had stakes in it,
that your identity was so wrapped up in your infirmity,
weakness, or defeat, you couldn’t imagine your life without your illness.

How would you feel?
How would you respond?
Would you hear pure insult in the question?
Or would you hear a faint echo of the truth?
The kind of truth that hurts.

Now, let me be clear, I don’t believe for a second
that Jesus is “blaming the victim” in this story.
The gospels attest to his deep compassion for the sick and disabled.
Not once in scripture does he respond to pain or illness with contempt,
mockery, or condescension.
Not once does he tell a sick person that her illness is her own fault.
In fact, he corrects that cultural misunderstanding about disease and
disability at every opportunity.

I say all this to make the point
that I trust Jesus’ heart and his motives enough
to take his question in *this* gospel story at face value.

When he looks at *this* man who has been languishing by the pool for such a long time, Jesus sees something more than physical illness. He sees defeat. He sees resignation. He sees psychological and spiritual stagnation. He sees a man whose hope has dwindled. Before him is a man whose imagination has atrophied to such a point that he can't even articulate what he wants for his body, his soul, or his future.

How do we know this?

Well, notice that he doesn't answer Jesus' question.

Do you want to be made well? Jesus asks.

But the man doesn't say, "yes."

Isn't that odd?

After thirty-eight years of intense suffering, he doesn't immediately respond with a resounding, "Yes! Yes!" Instead, he gets defensive.

He explains the mechanics of scarcity in his nursing home:

I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up.

He makes a compelling case for the cutthroat unfairness of the world:

While I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.

He hems, he haws, he dodges, and he invites pity.

In short, he avoids answering the question Jesus actually asked him, which isn't a question about the man's circumstances at all, but a question about his heart, his identity, and his desires:

What do you want . . . ?

Which makes me stop to think,

has Jesus ever asked you or me this question?

Do you and I want to be made well from all that stymies, hobbles, paralyzes and diminishes us?

Do we want to stand up?

Do we want to walk?

Do we want to move?
How have you answered these questions in the past?
How would you answer them today?
Do we know?

For me, the question stings
because I know exactly what it's like to say
I want out, I want freedom, I want healing – and not quite mean it.
Perhaps you know, as I do what it's like to live the “as soon as” life.
As soon as the water bubbles then I will get up off mat.
As soon as someone stops getting in my way, my life will be better.
As soon as I get into the water, my problems will be fixed.

The pool of Beth-zatha in this story is a metaphor for all the illusions
we have that convince us
that our life is nothing more than our circumstances.
These illusions deceive us into believing
that life is to be found outside ourselves.
It tricks us into living an “as soon as” life.
Most of us know what that is like.
It can be as trivial as
“as soon as” the dishes are done, then life will begin.
We say such things to ourselves or perhaps even out loud to one another:
“As soon as this or that happens, everything will be better.
I'll be happy.
My problems will go away.
I'll be satisfied.
All will be well.”

Children often say, “As soon as I get big, grow up, am an adult . . .”
And it continues throughout our life.
As soon as . . .
I have more time, more money, a better house, a better spouse . . .
As soon as . . .
he changes the way he acts, or she apologizes . . .

As soon as . . .

I feel better or get through this time in my life . . .

As soon as . . .

They do what I want . . .

As soon as . . .

I get over this grief and no longer feel sad . . .

We can fill in the blank with most anything.

The problem is . . . there always seems to be another pool of Beth-zatha around and meanwhile life has been put on hold.

The pause button has been pushed.

We sit on our mat, self-imprisoned by the circumstances of our life.

Now, I'm not suggesting that the circumstances of our lives are irrelevant or have no effect.

That's just not true.

They do affect us.

We are, however, more than the circumstances of our life.

Life is not to be found outside our various situations or circumstances but within them.

Life doesn't begin when the dishes are done,

life is doing the dishes

and all the things came before and will come after.

To believe something other than this is to live constantly looking for the next illusion, the next pool of Beth-zatha.

Jesus does not help the man get into the water.

He comes to him on his mat,

the same mat and situation the man has let entirely define him,

the mat he so wants to escape,

and Jesus speaks words of life and resurrection:

Stand up, take your mat and walk!

The man does not leave his mat behind.

It goes with him.

His circumstances are real.

The difference is he now carries them.
They no longer carry him.

Jesus doesn't change our outer circumstances.
Jesus changes us.
He calls us into a new way of being,
seeing, acting, speaking, thinking.
When we stand and rise to that new life,
we discover the circumstances have somehow changed.
That doesn't necessarily make life easy
or mean we no longer have to deal with the circumstances of life.
It means we engage our circumstances
from a different place and position.
The pool is drained of its power over us.
There is freedom where there was once imprisonment.
Inertia gives way to creativity.
Once stagnant spiritual waters now bubble with new life.

The life Jesus offers us does not happen *as soon as* . . .
It happens in this place, at this time, in these circumstances—

Are you sitting on your mat?
Are you looking for a pool of Beth-zatha to magically cure everything?
Jesus says to you and me today,
“Stand up, take your mat, and walk.”