

SERMON: Do You Want to be Made Well?
TEXT: John 5:1-9

5-22-22

Years ago, I knew a woman who I'll call Clara. Clara came to my church on a regular basis. Often, she and her husband sang in the choir. They had a teenage daughter who was very challenging. She became pregnant as a teenager and gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. She was attentive to the infant for a time, but before long Clara and her husband were raising their granddaughter.

Clara came to visit with me on occasion, to talk about her difficult marriage and the trouble they continued to have with their daughter. They were even having trouble controlling their granddaughter, whom they wanted to do a better job with raising than they had with her mother. Suffice it to say, there were behavior issues with every one of them.

When Clara came to me, she not only needed to vent and let off some steam, but she was also looking for advice on how to

handle a plethora of problems. But, Clara was not an easy person to help. For every bit of advice I gave her, she had an excuse. A reason why that wouldn't work. I became very frustrated, and began to think that, despite her tears of desperation, she really didn't want help. She was stuck in these patterns of behavior, and she didn't know how to change. Didn't have the energy or the courage to change.

After Clara's husband died unexpectedly, she decided to move to Texas with her granddaughter. As she was in the midst of this transition, she told me and several other women at church that she had found a lump in her breast. We all told her that she should not waste any time in getting to a doctor to have it checked out. "Oh, I know," she answered. "I'll do that when I get to Texas." We impressed upon her again that she should not wait, that this must be her top priority. She said she understood, but she waited anyway. And she died about a year later.

When I read the scripture from John about the man who had been ill for 38 years, I thought of Clara.

Jesus found this man near a pool in Jerusalem called Bethzatha. (You may have also heard it called Bethsaida or Bethesda.) It was common to see people who were blind or lame or paralyzed lying around the pool. According to one commentary, "the earliest manuscripts of John do not explain why the invalids are there," but verse 4 was added by later scribes. "According to this explanation, people believed that an angel of the Lord would come and stir the waters, and that whoever was the first to enter the pool after the waters were stirred would be healed of his or her malady." (Elisabeth Johnson, "Commentary on John 5:1-9," May 1, 2016, www.workingpreacher.com)

"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?'" Many of us would call this a dumb question if anyone other than Jesus had asked it. But "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.”

I wonder if Jesus was as frustrated with this man as I was with Clara when she seemed to have an excuse for every piece of advice I gave her. Jesus has asked a simple question, with just two possible answers: yes or no. DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL?

Why doesn't the man who has been ill for 38 years just say, "Yes!"? "Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes! It's all I've ever wanted. It's what I've been praying for, hoping for, waiting for my whole life! Yes, I want to be made well!" I just want to shake him.

But instead, let's take a moment to put ourselves in his place. Just imagine waiting thirty-eight years for healing. But he needs help getting into the pool quickly, and he has not been successful. Any one of us at this point would be depressed and

doubtful and despairing. Out of energy. Out of faith. Out of hope. Yeah, sure, he wants to be made well, but, really, what are the odds of that happening?

Or maybe he's afraid it is possible to be made well. He doesn't know how to live like that. He doesn't know what it means, what it looks like, what it feels like. He doesn't know how difficult it might be. He doesn't know if he can. And he's afraid to fail.

In the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*, Brooks Hatlan is an old man when he is finally paroled from prison after 50 years of living behind bars. He should be happy about it. After all, that's all any prisoner wants is freedom. But he's afraid. He even tries to hurt another prisoner to be able to stay. When he's released he finds that the world is a different place; it doesn't look familiar at all. He tries, but he can't handle the modern world and its faced-paced ways, and he takes his own life.

DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL? Jesus asks this question of all of us, no matter our age, our attention to healthy living, or the status of our physical health. There are many ways to be healed, but the choice is not as easy as it sounds. Because - unlike the man at the pool, whom Jesus heals immediately despite his poor attitude - becoming well is hard work.

Linda is our Office Administrator at First Presbyterian. She's been fighting cancer for a few years, and it has spread to other parts of her body. Just recently, they discovered a tumor in her brain. She had surgery on May 12. She was back home four days later. And she was back at work just one week after that surgery. I talked with her the other day, and she was very open about the continuing journey of fighting this cancer. There are more treatments and trials to come.

Of course, she's afraid. And she admits to moments of great darkness, which she described as a black hole. It sucks her in, takes all her energy away, and robs her of hope. But she knows

that she can't stay there. She knows she has to pull herself out of that black hole and into the light where she will find great love and compassion, healing hands, and healing prayers. The treatments will be physically challenging, and ultimately may not be effective. She knows that she may not survive the cancer in the long run; her life may be cut shorter than most. But for now, she wants to live.

She wants to be outdoors and walk her dogs. She wants to go to work, because it's a job she enjoys and it's with people who genuinely care about her. She wants to continue being active in her church, going to Bible Study, playing handbells, and serving meals to the homeless. She wants to enjoy her daughters and care for her mother and visit with friends. All of these things add to her healing process. All of these things make up what it means to live, not simply survive.

Linda's answer to Jesus is a resounding, YES. "Yes, I want to be made well in all the ways that I can be in body, mind, and

spirit.” And she has already experienced healing miracles, both big and small. The miracle of feeling all the prayers for her, as she described it, “like a weighted blanket,” covering her. And the miracle that a nurse cared enough not to shave the whole side of her head, but only what was needed, and she even braided a small section of hair right below her incision.

Back to the scripture reading, I find it interesting that Jesus either doesn't seem to mind or doesn't have time for the sick man's whining and excuses. In response, Jesus simply commands him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”

Instantly, Jesus heals him. But instead of showing gratitude, the man essentially turns Jesus in to the religious authorities when - as the story continues beyond our passage - they question him about carrying his mat on the Sabbath.

As our country and our world continue to face growing violence and hatred, we are clearly in need of healing. And

instead of looking around at others and diagnosing their sickness, we need to look in the mirror and realize that the healing must begin in us.

Jesus is asking, DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL? May we answer, "Yes, Lord," and be willing to stand up and walk. To the glory of God!

AMEN.