Stand Up and Walk!

John 5:1-18

Dr. David Gushee

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Introduction

I mentioned in my first sermon on the Gospel of John that scholars used to say it was written long after Jesus’ lifetime and had the least connection to the facts of the actual ministry of Jesus. Basically, the idea was that the Gospel of John was mainly theologizing about Jesus rather than telling the story of Jesus.

But then I suggested that John might just come from a different stream of tradition. It might just be written by an author who knew things about Jesus, and had conversations with Jesus, and saw events in the ministry of Jesus, that others did not.

The Mysterious Pool of Bethesda

The striking story told in our text this morning offers good evidence for the second view.

The text begins with a factual claim:

***Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha [or Bethesda], which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed.***

A pool with five porticoes, or covered entry porches, for a long time made no sense to biblical scholars, and no archaeologist had ever been able to identify the location of a Pool of Bethesda. So the historicity, the historical reliability, of this story, had long been questioned.

However, in a 2013 article by Urban von Wahlde, the mystery is resolved. It turns out that archaeologists had excavated the site of this pool in the late 19th century, and 100 years later have now finally been able to identify it properly.

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/jerusalem/the-bethesda-pool-site-of-one-of-jesus%E2%80%99-miracles/>

The excavated pool is rectangular, with basins at the north and south and a wall separating them; all together, it adds up to five sides. Each side had a portico. Von Wahlde proposes that the pool was a Jewish ritual bath, or *mikveh*, a body of water which by Jewish Law must be in contact with a natural source of water. Mikveh baths remain critically important in Orthodox Judaism today. Ritual baths were and are places where Jews went to become purified from ritual uncleanness; sacred utensils are cleansed there; and converts are basically baptized there. In a sense, the baptism of our sister Claire Kennedy today connects at least indirectly to the mikveh tradition. Isn’t that cool?

The pool at Bethesda was fed by fresh water flowing from the north. Also: this bath had been a site of reported healings. So people congregated near the water, and legend or tradition said that the first one into the water when it stirred would be healed. Most of your Bibles have footnotes to a variant text suggesting that when an angel of God went into the water, the waters would be stirred up and then a healing could happen.

Von Wahlde finds that the Romans knew the tradition that the water at this spot had healing powers, so, as they did in Bath in England and other places, they built their own Roman bath right there at the spot. Later it became a pilgrimage site and Christians built chapels and eventually a church on the site. The excavation work that uncovered the Pool of Bethesda was undertaken under the site of this church.

Jesus Needs No Healing Waters

Whether Jesus himself believed that the waters of the Pool of Bethesda had healing powers is not clear from the story. Let’s follow the text closely:

***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.’***

It’s pathetic, really. This man had waited by the pool for 38 long years. That’s about 14,000 days if you are keeping score at home. For 14,000 days he had looked for a miracle. For 14,000 days he had been outhustled by other seekers after miracles at that pool. The received text never says that any of the other folks actually had been healed there. It sounds more like one of those things that people hope for than that actually happens, maybe something that people hope for long enough that a few stories inevitably began to circulate that right there at that spot a few people had actually experienced an end to their Mesothelioma or Carpal Tunnel or…whatever.

We are not really all that different. We so very much want to be made well. At least, whatever we think is wrong with us, we want to be made well from it., We still take the baths looking for healing. We go over to Hot Springs, Arkansas, or the whirlpool down at the LA Fitness. And we take the medicines and the counseling, the acupuncture and the hypnotherapy and the aromatherapy and the reflexology and the meditation and the crystals and the essences of oil and the Orange Theory and…the chocolate and for most of us everything that mainstream medicine has to offer. We all seek healing for ourselves and our loved ones. It is the human condition, a bunch of broken people looking to be made well.

But Jesus doesn’t need any miracle pools. He is the Word through whom all creation was made. He is God Incarnate. He can turn water into wine without a word or touch. So he just says:

***‘Stand up, take your mat, and walk.’ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. -Jn 5:6-9***

Do You Want to be Well?

It was all so simple. A man who had been unable to help himself for 38 years gets healed at a word from Jesus. All Jesus asked him was ‘Do you want to be made well?’ and the man’s answer was: I have tried for 38 years. And Jesus’ response was stand up, grab that old dirty mat, and walk. And that was that.

It is tantalizing to want to make it as simple as that today. If you just want to be made well, you can be well! Want it bad enough and you can be well! Just get up and walk! Think positive thoughts and you can be rich! How many TV and megachurch pastors have made quite a good living selling that message!

One reason they have succeeded sometimes is that there is at least a small grain of truth in some of what they say.

That’s because there is a kind of wisdom in the question, Do you want to be well? Some small number of people do not really want to be well.

Think about it.

There are at times certain rewards in not being physically, emotionally, or psychologically well. Illness can become woven into our identities such that we define ourselves by our condition. It can evoke sympathy from others. It can even be a source of power – you can’t ask that of me, or make me do that, because I am not well.

So a messenger who says something like, if you want it, you can be well, can shake us up a bit. Maybe there’s a new way of defining our identity, a better way of getting people’s attention, and preferable ways to gain needed power in our relationships.

Do you want to be well, and relate to the world in a new way? Maybe it’s time to think about yourself and your life in a new way! Maybe it’s time to get up and walk! Think differently about things, and you might find healing. This, as I understand it, is one of the key principles of cognitive behavioral therapy, for example. And it was of course the main idea behind the old power of positive thinking idea. It’s silly as an explanation for everything. It’s true as far as it goes.

But of course its usefulness does run out. It certainly runs out when people start judging others for not being well. We know that this idea was right there in Jewish religious culture: People are ill because they have done something wrong. If you are not well, you have sinned and are reaping the consequences. Jesus himself reflects the idea in a rather disturbing way when he later says to the now healed man: ***“Do not sin anymore, so nothing worse happens to you.”*** That’s odd, because this is an idea that he explicitly rejects over in John 9.

But how many have been told it: If you have enough faith, you will never be sick. Or if you have enough faith, God will heal you. Or if you think rightly about the nature of health and illness, you need never be sick. So: you are sick and you are not getting better. Therefore, you must have sinned, or must not have enough faith, or must be thinking wrongly about health and illness. Believe more. Pray harder. Think right. And on it goes in an endless loop of misery, self-recrimination, and religious judgmentalism.

We Caught a Glimpse, and Now We Wait

Instead of all that, this story seems to teach something subtler. In this sinful and broken world, everyone ends up getting sick sometimes and at a rate of 100% people die. All around the world and all around our lives and sometimes in our very lives we see the frustrations and even heartbreak of people engaged in the endless, fruitless quest for health.

We wish Jesus would come our way, or drop by that doctor’s office or hospital, the way that he came by the pool of Bethesda that memorable afternoon. We pray for healing, if we dare hope for it; we pray for his presence and his touch. We cannot help but pray, even if we have reached the wise place of not making our faith contingent on getting the answer we want.

***It is best to think of Jesus’ earthly ministry as heaven come to earth, the Creator visiting his Creation, as the Future of total healing, life, and resurrection breaking through in our suffering world,*** ***for a time***. Humanity caught a glimpse of what is coming one day, and we relive that glimpse every time we read stories like these. For us, most days, it is enough – it will have to be enough – to be reminded of this foretaste of what Jesus will one day make real forever when the kingdom comes in all fullness. Until then we wait; and we accompany each other on our often-sorrowful journeys; and we look for small glimpses of grace when God shows up and surprises us.

Opposition Builds

Our text ends today with Jesus, and the man he healed, in trouble. After all, all this took place on the Sabbath, and everyone knows that even if you get miraculously healed after 14,000 days of waiting, you had better not carry your little mat under your arm because that is work and work is banned.

For that matter, healing is work, even if for Jesus is doesn’t seem very strenuous. He says a word and that’s it. But it’s work, and work is wrong, even if it transforms the life of a man who waited 14,000 days to be able to walk home.

***The Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath. -Jn 5:16***

But Jesus doesn’t give an inch.

***“My Father is still working, and I also am working.” -Jn 5:17***

And their response:

***For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God. -Jn 5:18***

We so much wish Jesus would come on by when we are sick. We so much dread death and fight it with all our power.

But in that brief moment in history, when he did come, when he did manifest both the creative power of the beginning and the healing power of the End in that blaze of divine glory that John 1 promises, the response of Religion was to move as quickly as possible to kill him.

Because everyone knew that the rules related to the Sabbath that Religion had elaborated from a few liberating sentences in the 10 Commandments must now be interpreted to prevent even the healing of a sick man on the Sabbath. And everyone knew that what you do with someone who demonstrates this much spiritual power, and this much intimacy with the Divine Father, and this much independence of Religious Authority, is that you must kill him as soon as possible.

And Jesus moved resolutely forward doing his Father’s will, as the shadow of the Cross loomed closer.