



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

A Critical Question John 5:1-9; Acts 16:9-15

I don't know how many times I have preached on this passage--at least nine or ten, I think. The story line is simple enough: There is a religious festival and Jesus is in Jerusalem. He walks by the Pool of Bethesda, a large area where chronically ill people collect. Tradition held that from time to time an angel would stir the water with his wings and the first person to get into the water would be healed of any infirmities. Among the many people there was a man who has been ill for almost four decades. Somehow Jesus knows that this man has been at the pool a long time and is still unable to walk. He asks him if he wants to be made well. Most of the time, it sounds like a ridiculous question because why else would this man keep coming to a place where there is the possibility of being healed? Why would he spend the bulk of his life just sitting there if he did not want to be made well? On the other hand, was there some other reason the man had been sitting there for so long without being healed? Was it not simply a matter of not being quick enough to get into the pool first at some point? Jesus wants to know.

For most, if not all, of the sermons I have preached on this text, I have adopted a common perspective. God offers healing, but we have to do our part. We have to at least do what is necessary to get into the water if we want to experience its benefits. We are partners with God on this journey of life and if we are not willing to put forth some effort, we need to step aside let someone with a bit more gumption have his or her turn.

As I thought about the text this past week, that was the path I was walking along. I was going to explore some of the problems we are facing as a community and nation and suggest that if we want things to change, we have to be a part of the change. There is nothing new about that message. It is a well-traveled path and I was skipping along . . . that is until I tripped over a thought I had never had before.

The man never really answered Jesus' question. He offered an excuse as to why he could not get into the water ahead of anyone else, but he never said, "Of course I want to be healed. What a ridiculous question!" What if,

when Jesus asked the man, "Do you want to be made well?", he had answered, "No."? And what if Jesus were okay with that answer?

I had never considered that possibility before. Then again, I had never thought about this passage, or any others like it, from the standpoint of someone who is disabled. It had not occurred to me that I was reading the Bible as if it were written only for me and folks like me.

Leah Lyman Waldron, a pastor in the Atlanta area, is the one who stuck out her foot and brought me down to earth. In an article on this passage of scripture, she agreed with me that stories of healing in the Bible are about "God's life-restoring love."¹ God does not want us to suffer. God wants us to be whole and to enjoy all that life offers us. To that end, in addition to being stories about individuals who are restored to health, healing stories are also frequently metaphors of the ways God liberates us from suffering and ignorance and restores us to the image of perfection which originated in the beginning and will be re-established at the consummation of the age. Healing makes us whole.

Listen to one of our favorite Old Testament passages, a word from Isaiah that we often read during Advent:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. Isaiah 35:5-6, 10

Commenting on such passages, Rabbi Julia Watts Belser, herself wheelchair mobile, explains that the prophets frequently used the healing of a trio of disabilities--blind, deaf, and lame--as images of God's liberation and redemption. It is as if there is an "imperative to be healed," she says, an "erasure" of disability from the human experience. The prophets speak as if perfect bodies and minds are what all of God's children should desire.²

¹Rev. Leah Lyman Waldron, "A Complicated Healing: John 5:1-9," *Modern Metanoia* (April 18, 2016); available online at: <https://modernmetanoia.org/2016/04/18/easter-6c-a-complicated-healing/>.

²Julia Watts Belser, "Violence, Disability, and the Politics of Healing: The Inaugural Nancy Eiesland Endowment Lecture," *Journal of Disability & Religion*, 19:3, 178.

It is true that at times the prophets envision God's ideal world in which we will all have whole bodies, sharp minds, beautiful complexions, and perfect hair! It is a world in which everyone will be the same. Differences and disabilities will be seen as tragic at best and as sinful at worst. Health will be understood as a sign of blessing and completeness. "Do you want to be made well?" Of course!

As I picked myself up and dusted off some of my preconceived ideas, Rev. Waldron pointed out to me that this perspective does not take into account the meaning of a person's life as he or she is. If we do not handle them carefully, stories like this one assume that "there is something 'wrong' with people with disabilities, something that needs to be 'healed'--a religiously lacquered euphemism for 'fixed.'"³

When we pay attention to scripture, we realize that the number of such "idealized" passages is quite limited. The abundance of prophetic proclamations heralding the Day of the Lord are inclusive of all people. Listen to Jeremiah speak words of hope and grace:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them
the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor,
together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping
they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will
let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they
shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and
Ephraim is my firstborn. Jeremiah 31:8-9

God's true welcome, then, is inclusive. The blind, the lame, children, women in labor, those who grieve, and all the rest of us who are never likely to appear on the covers of *GQ* or *Vogue* are welcomed into God's kingdom--along with those who seem to the rest of us to be perfect specimens of humanity. Jeremiah and Isaiah both speak of God making access for all people--every valley will be lifted up and every mountain and hill will be made low so that the road home will be level and easily traveled.

Mind you, this perspective is not one that looks on injuries and disabilities as sent from God for our blessing and benefit. Far from it! Nor does this understanding negate the desire of people who want to be able to

³Waldron.

see, to hear, to walk, and shout joyfully in God's world. Instead, this understanding of God's grace holds that all people possess gifts and abilities—often despite disabilities—and sometimes because of them.

My Great-Uncle Bill began his career as a public health physician. When he realized that he was going blind, he returned to medical school at the University of Virginia and trained in psychiatry. He had a successful career in which his listening skills were sharpened as a result of his blindness. He was able to help countless patients throughout his long career. Because he was able to live normally in the university community, to have a family and many friends, to work and play and travel as he chose, I never thought of him as disabled.

Like many of you, Deborah and I enjoy watching Dancing with the Stars. We have been amazed this season to see Nyle DiMarco, a model who is deaf and from a family that is several generations deaf. In a competition where timing and movements depend on the music, DiMarco is often flawless, basing his rhythm on sound vibrations, physical cues from his partner, and hours of intense training. Other stars have appeared on the show with prosthetic feet, a missing limb, or some other challenge that would seem to limit their ability to dance. Each of them, however, has proved to be an excellent dancer, allowing their personalities and other abilities to fill the gaps left by some physical limitation. Were I to be on that program, I would fall into the category of being rhythmically impaired. I would never be "safe."

I think of Special Olympians and Paralympians who compete in a variety of sports with one another. We all marvel at musicians who manage to play or sing beautiful music despite being blind or even deaf. Dare we forget the contribution Beethoven made to the world of music when he could never "hear" a note that he played?! You have probably seen artwork produced by someone who held the brush with their teeth or toes. We have all heard Stephen Hawking explain his complex views of the universe by speaking through a computer from his wheelchair. It is sometimes because of a particular disability or challenge that some people are able to make their unique contribution to the world.

"Do you want to be made well?" Some people might want to answer, "No! Accept me as I am—imperfect just like you."

Let us not forget that Moses had a speech impediment. Isaac was not particularly bright. Jacob came limping home to his brother Esau, the direct

result of an encounter with God. Saul, the first king selected by God to rule Israel, suffered from depression and experienced fits of rage. The Apostle Paul bore the marks of repeated beatings, the ravages of starvation, and physical impairments caused, perhaps, by shipwrecks, stoning, and fending off attacks from wild animals thanks to the cruelty of the Romans. And let us not forget Jesus, a man who, after his resurrection, was marked by scars from nails and the thrust of a Roman spear. Foretelling the Suffering Servant's fate, Isaiah imagined the Messiah as being far from perfect:

Just as there were many who were astonished at him—so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals— so he shall startle many nations . . . For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

Isaiah 52:14-15a, 53:2-3

Depending on your perspective, God chose a rather suspect group of folks to lead his people, carry the promise forward, and participate in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As I look around, it seems as if God still chooses a rather interesting and diverse group of people today. And aren't we glad he does!

"Do you want to be made well?" The question begins to sound absurd in a culture that is privileged with excellent healthcare. Perhaps if we heard the question phrased this way: "Do you want to be made whole?" Biblical wholeness, as the choir sang a bit earlier, is not equivalent to physical perfection. Biblical wholeness is health of the soul first so that we can benefit from the condition of our bodies and minds.

Do you want to be made well? We may be fine just as we are, differences, disabilities, strengths, talents, deficits, shortcomings all. Those things that sometimes separate us from one another may be the very things that inspire us, challenge us, empower us, and deepen our faith. If we need any healing at all, it is likely a healing of our spirits which tend to see one another in relation to a set of values that are based on who we are rather than on who God understands us to be.

It occurs to me that many of the problems in the world arise because we don't like someone else's differences. Race, religion, politics, gender, sexuality, economic level, disabilities, education, abilities, and a host of other things will divide us if we let them. If I perceive that something about you is not right, is a deficit or disability, I might want you to "be healed" so that you will be more like me. To see you as less than you are demeans you and devalues your place in my life.

Lately, in our own community, we have been having two conversations—conversations about bathrooms and schools—which demonstrate that we often see other people as a problem to be fixed rather than as individuals to be valued. We rush to address issues that arise from the perspective of their inconvenience to us rather than as a concern for what someone else might need. We fail to consider the value that person holds in our community and what their well-being might mean for us all. Never should we let a bathroom or a railroad track determine how we treat another human being, a person created and blessed by God.

Do you want to be made well? Yes—of insensitivity, bigotry, and oppression. Do you want to be made well? Of the thing that defines who I am? No!

If Jesus taught us anything, he demonstrated that in the kingdom he brought with him, all are welcome. Everyone is accepted, valued, appreciated, honored, and loved. Everyone is a part of the kingdom ushered in by the One who was broken for us that we might see ourselves as whole. Thanks be to God! Amen.

May 1, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We long to be like Lydia, O God, eager, listening, open, and welcoming. We honor her faithfulness and celebrate her openness to allowing the Gospel to permeate her entire life. We thank you for the people around us who are willing to share their experience of you, to preach with their lives, and to welcome us into your loving arms.

The list of names that we hear on Sunday mornings seems longer each week, O God, and we know that each one has a special need. We pray that you will care for them and provide for them all that they need. We also carry our own prayer list tucked down in our heart. It holds the names of loved ones and friends. It includes concerns in the church, challenges in our community, and strife throughout the world. It speaks of personal matters that are too precious to mention but too important to ignore. Listen to each concern, we pray. Answer according to your wisdom and way. And grant peace to us all.

It is spring and we still celebrate resurrection. Refresh our lives, we pray. Bring us new growth. Send our roots deep into faith in you and then stretch us upward and out so that all of the goodness you embody in us will be available to the world we inhabit. Grow us, O God, into the likeness of your Son.

Help us in our weakness, O God, and utilize our strengths. We have come to seek your blessing and to offer ourselves in obedience to your calling. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.