

Jon Hauerwas – Whole – May 1, 2016
Psalm 121 and John 5:1-9

Today, I have a number of images and stories for you to consider. Each comes from a different time and place. And each one serves as a reminder of how eager we are to find a cure for all that ails us – to discover some lasting healing or restoration. These stories aren't always pretty. In fact, as is the case with my first example, they can be absolutely cringe-worthy. Still, my point here is simple. I hope that you might consider today what it means to be made whole.

Well, I still clearly remember the first and only time that I ever witnessed a faith healing. I was in a department store in Washington State. A young man was hobbling along when a young woman approached him. "I see that your leg is injured," she said. "Do you mind if I pray for you?" "Well, okay, I guess," he responded. She then touched his leg where the injury occurred and asked if he could feel the warmth of her touch.

The young man nodded slightly and awkwardly, which seemed to convince the young woman that something had already begun to happen. Then, with a smile on her face, she began to pray: "In the name of Jesus, God, we ask that you would bring him full healing. We pray that you would heal him right now, God. Amen."

Next, she looked up and asked him if he still felt any pain. “Well, yeah, some,” he said. “Still just a little bit,” she asked, her voice dripping with disappointment.

“Yeah, a little,” he said, nodding slightly. The would-be faith healer then grabbed his leg and slowly pulled it forward, causing it to straighten out for a moment. The look on his face was pained. “But, you couldn’t do that before, now could you,” she continued. His expression seemed ambivalent to me, and I was amazed that he allowed this to go on.

“If you’re still feeling a little bit of pain,” she said, “then let me pray again. In the name of Jesus, heal him. We ask for full healing, full restoration, in the name of Jesus. Does it feel any better now,” she questioned hopefully. He could only manage a shrug. Still, she proceeded to pray for him two or three more times.

Between prayers, she asked him personal questions, like how the injury occurred. “I had a wreck on my dirt bike,” the young man confided. “The doctors say that it’s broken.” And then, when she had exhausted all of her prayers, the young woman conveyed the message of Jesus, as she understood it, and asked if he believed. He said that he did. Eventually, they parted ways, though just ten minutes later, I passed that young man again as he slowly hobbled out of the store. I noticed

that he exited just as he had entered – all alone. And for me, the lesson on that occasion was clear – that healing would not come so easily.

Next, I once traveled to Hot Springs, Arkansas, where I learned that scores of tourists had, for decades during the twentieth century, journeyed to that area for rest and relaxation. But, the lodges there boasted of more than fine accommodation and warm water. They also claimed that the naturally occurring water and vapors provided medicinal and even healing properties, as well. Thus, those who had run out of traditional medical options and who had nothing left to lose traveled, often at great expense, to seek what they hoped might be a cure, if not merely some temporary relief for their ailments.

It all reminded me of a similar experience in Bath, England. Hundreds of years ago, Roman conquerors built monuments to the naturally boiling waters there which, in turn, became the centerpiece of worship and healing in that region. Or, if you are not familiar with either of these places, you may have heard of the fabled Fountain of Youth. In literature, this fountain is a spring which is said to restore the youth of anyone who drinks or bathes in its waters. Tales of such a fountain have been recounted across the world for thousands of years.

All of this leads me to our gospel lesson this morning. Here, we find a man who is a Jewish citizen of the Roman Empire. We soon learn that he is physically challenged in some way. We don't know exactly what his diagnosis seems to be, but only that he has been suffering for 38 years. In other words, his condition is permanent.

In this passage, he is lying beside a pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. According to biblical scholars, this was "an area northeast of the Temple where the sheep were brought into Jerusalem for sacrifice."¹ This place was symbolic because of its unusual waters which often stirred and bubbled. Like the Hot Springs of Arkansas or the Roman baths in England, this was a naturally occurring phenomena. But, the people of that day didn't know it. Instead, they believed that the supernatural was found there. And, as legend had it, when the waters began to stir or bubble, the first person in would be healed.

Sadly, this man is too infirm to climb in, at least on his own accord. His only hope, then, is that someone else might carry him in at the appropriate time and that he might reach the moving waters before anyone else in the area.

¹ Raymond E. Brown. *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John*. Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York: 1966, pg. 206.

It is here where Jesus initiates a conversation. He turns to the man and asks a seemingly obvious question: “Do you want to be made well?” Of course he does. All of the signs are there. He does not look well, and he is lying beside a pool for desperate and chronically ill people.

But consider, if you will, the welcoming of new officers or members in the life of this congregation “Please state your purpose,” we say, “by answering these questions.” Don’t we already know that they want to do this? I mean, they’ve already spoken with a nominating committee or attended a class. Often, they have spoken with the pastor about their intention. They have arrived on the appropriate Sunday. They have come forward when their names were called, and they have stood at the foot of the chancel in front of the entire congregation. And yet, still, we ask them to state their purpose. Don’t we already know why they are here?

The point of the question is not a lack of knowledge but rather, an abundance of respect. God will not force God’s self on those who wish to remain distant, just as the church will not call those into leadership and membership who would rather not serve. Implicit in every interaction with God and God’s representatives is the freedom to say “no.”

This man, though, is willing. He outlines his problem, saying that others are too fast for him and that he could never make it on his own. The logical response might be for Jesus to have mercy on this man, and to carry him into the swirling waters as he so desperately wishes. Instead, Jesus needs only to command: “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” And “at once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.”

We don't know why this man is chosen – why some people were healed in Jesus' day and others were not – or even, why the same is true today. But here, we do find a powerful account of mercy, love, and yes, Easter triumph – of healing, of restoration, and of wholeness. We may not have the power to command the stormy seas to calm or to heal a stranger's every need. But, we can do what we are able and know that, at the end of days, wholeness will come to all of the earth.

May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.