

March 30, 2025

The Gospel of John

XV. Do You Want to Be Healed?

John 5:1-17

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

“Do you want to be healed?” Such a strange question to ask this man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Almost an insensitive question, we might think. One preacher says he wouldn’t have blamed this man if he had answered Jesus with sarcasm: *“Do you want to be healed?” “Well, it has crossed my mind a time or two in the last thirty-eight years I have spent lying by this pool!”*

By the way, archaeologists have actually found this pool in Jerusalem – and it is just as John describes it: four colonnades along each of the four sides of the pool, with a fifth colonnade running across the middle of the pool, perhaps to separate the male invalids from the female invalids. It’s also quite large – meaning that there would have been hundreds of people around the edges of the pool, each one hoping to be the first in the water when the angel stirred the surface. That is what would have brought all those people to this pool – the belief that an angel occasionally touched the surface of the water, and that the first one entering the water once the angel had done so would be healed. Of course this was just what people thought – nothing at all in the Bible indicates that God was using this pool and His angels to provide healing there. But when you are desperate, you can be willing to believe in just about anything that might offer a cure.

And, after thirty-eight years of infirmity, this man must have been desperate for healing. Or was he? I only ask because of the strangeness of the answer this man gives to Jesus’ strange question. When Jesus asks, *“Do you want to be healed?”* you would think this man would jump all over that question – even if he had no idea who Jesus was. Still, out of desperation if nothing else, you would expect that he would jump on the possibility that Jesus’ question seemed to be offering to him – that maybe this stranger asking this strange question might just be able to help with his healing. You would expect the man to say to Jesus something like, *“Yes, sir. I want to be healed. Can you heal me?”*

But that is not what he says to Jesus. *“Do you want to be healed?” “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me.”* Does that sound like the response of a man thirty-eight years desperate to be healed? *“Someone always beats me to the water.”* He doesn’t sound eager to be healed, so much as he sounds like someone who has given up on ever getting healed. So maybe Jesus’ question is not so strange after all. Maybe, in asking that question, Jesus has read something important in this man’s soul – something needing to be addressed. That just because he has been sitting next to healing water for thirty-eight years doesn’t necessarily mean that he does really want to be healed.

“Do you want to be healed?” Now, we know what happens next – without further ado, Jesus heals him with just a word, and the man takes up his bed and walks away. But maybe before we look at the healing itself, we need to linger a bit longer with Jesus’ strange question and this man’s strange response. Maybe even think about what our own response would be, were Jesus to walk up to us one day and ask if we wanted to be healed. Because, if nothing else, what Jesus’ question to this man evokes in us is our own awareness of what in us needs healing. Jesus says, *“Do you want to be healed?”* – and we cannot help but begin to list the ways we wish we could be healed, the things of which we wish we could be healed. For some it may well be something physical, as with this man – something in our bodies causing us pain or limiting our functioning or just simply complicating what used to be the easy motions of our everyday life. For some it could be mental or emotional – lingering traumas and struggles within, which trouble us and disturb our peace. Or perhaps the healing we need is relational – hurts inflicted upon us out of our past, still haunting us; or perhaps struggles in our present relationships, as we try to work out that delicate dance of loving and being loved, or just simply trying to get along with others. Or perhaps it is something less specific that needs healing and more comprehensive – that life itself that needs healing. The life we are currently living bringing us no satisfaction, and far from what we hoped life would be by now. Whatever it is, the need for healing is in all of us – something we wish was different, better, taken away, made right. *“Do you want to be healed?”* Jesus asks of each one of us. Are we willing to lay before Him the specific healing we so desperately need?

“Do you want to be healed?” That question perhaps evokes something else in us – if we’re willing to be truly honest about this. We hear in this question something which unsettles us, perhaps. Because what that question can also be understood to be asking of us is, are we willing to change? Are we willing to be changed? Do we want to become genuinely, perhaps even profoundly, different than we are now – to live a different sort of life in a different sort of way? Because healing always involves some form of change. An unsettling question – because some of us have been living with our particular spiritual, moral, physical, emotional, and relational illnesses or deficiencies or wounds or crutches for a long time, perhaps even longer than the thirty-eight years of the man beside the pool. And the thought of giving up life as we know it is a little disturbing – the devil we know as opposed to the one we don’t, to use an old turn of phrase.

I mean, what would it feel like not to have our issue, whatever it is, any longer? What would it feel like to let go of the baggage we have been carrying for so long? Would we miss it? What would it be like to no long limp along in the fashion to which we have become fully accustomed – but instead to take up our bed and start walking again? *“Do you want to be healed?”* – meaning are we willing to exchange the familiarity and security of the infirmity we know for the uncertainty of what life would be like without that infirmity? To, in effect, take away our excuse, our rationale, our alibi for what we are as opposed to what we are meant to be? Maybe that is why the man by the pool answers Jesus so obliquely – not *“Yes, I want to be healed”* but instead, *“I’ve got no one to help me into the pool.”* Maybe, when so directly asked about it, he too felt threatened by the thought of leaving his old life behind.

“Do you want to be healed?” Or maybe, just maybe, what disturbs us most about that question is not the question itself, but rather who it is who asks that question of us. If we let Him in to our infirmity, if we even so much as turn to Him asking to be healed, how do we know He

will limit Himself to just that much – and let us get on with our lives as we see fit? How do we know that if we give Him that inch, He won't then come in and take a mile? How do we know that He won't then ask other things of us – things we don't really want to do? Lead us places we don't really want to go? We see it happening all the time in the Bible – how do we know it won't happen the same way to us, turning us into precisely the sort of persons the world around us scoffs at as “Jesus freaks”? How do we know if being healed by Jesus might not mean more of Jesus in us and with us than we are prepared to permit?

Well, the Bible does pretty well guarantee us that that is precisely what being healed by Jesus will mean for us. Give Him an inch for His grace to get in, and He will indeed take a mile of that grace changing and expanding our faith. But the part we are leaving out in that fear of yielding control to Him is what the Bible says to us about what more of Jesus will actually mean for us. It will always and ever mean something very, very good – even if we can't see it now, and can't imagine what it might look and feel like then. To Nicodemus Jesus said more of Him, being healed by Him, would mean being born from above into the deep, deep love of God which seeks us out in this world in order that we should not perish but live forever.¹ To the Samaritan woman at the well Jesus said that more of Him, being healed by Him, would mean never being thirsty again forever in our souls – instead, a spring of water welling up within us into abundant life here and everlasting life in the kingdom to come.² Thinking of that man sitting by the pool – it would mean not so much jumping into the water as having the water jump into him.

And to the father whose son was dying Jesus said that more of Him, being healed by Him, would mean that even death need no longer be feared.³ More of Jesus, being healed by Jesus, means more of everything that truly satisfies our souls in this world. By His healing power making of our lives something better and fuller and richer and more joyful and blessed. So why wouldn't we want Him to come to us, tap us on the shoulder, look with love upon us as He asks us, “*Do you want to be healed?*” Seeing how much He loves us and wants to heal us, how could we not set all our concerns aside and answer Him, “*Yes, Lord. Heal me, Lord Jesus!*”

And so Jesus says to the man by the pool, “*Get up, take up your bed and walk.*” And at once the man was healed – after thirty-eight years healed – and he took up his bed and began walking. The man rose to his feet for the first time in thirty-eight years – new strength flooding through his bones and muscles, new joy and hope and the possibility of new life beginning to rise up within his spirit. Until suddenly he is standing tall. Until suddenly he is walking firmly. Until suddenly he has not just been made well, he has been made whole.

And this, this is what Jesus is seeking to do in us when He stops by us, peers into our souls, and asks of us, “*Do you want to be healed?*” What He is finally saying to us in that question is that He really can make us well, really can make us whole, really does want to give to us our healing. He who is the Way and the Truth and the Life⁴ for us would never ask us such a question if it were not His desire and His intention to fulfill the hope that question evokes. Now, He may not heal us in exactly the way we are hoping for and praying for; His healing of us may not come on the timetable we ourselves desire. But we can trust what that question promises us. We can trust that in the ways in which we most need it, to the degree to which we are willing to open ourselves up to it, Jesus really will make us well. Jesus really will make us whole. Jesus really will give us new and better life. For He has compassion upon our woundedness. And He longs to

set us free. He is even now working to set us free. This is the Good News of the Gospel: in Jesus Christ, we are being healed.

Some years ago, Walter Wangerin, the beloved Luther writer and pastor, was diagnosed with cancer at the age of sixty-four. The doctors had told him that his cancer would be terminal, just a matter of how long – a few months, a few years. He died in 2021. But along the way of his illness, and of his search for healing and wholeness in Jesus, he wrote a beautiful little book about his experience of being with Jesus, and of Jesus being with Him in the midst of the cancer. He entitled his book, Letters from the Land of Cancer.

In the opening section of this book, he writes of what had been the greatest comfort to him as he had walked through this valley of the shadow of illness and approaching death. He said that for him the comfort had come specifically from the image of Jesus as our Good Shepherd (think 23rd Psalm), and therefore also of himself as a lamb in Jesus' care. It is an image of Jesus that he said resurfaced in his illness from out of his childhood – specifically in the form of a song, an old children's hymn, that his mother used to sing to him whenever he was sick as a child, or having bad dreams in the night. He describes such a scene from his childhood, a cold winter night, prairie wind rattling the windows. He woke up in the middle of the night with a stomachache and a head full of nightmares. He cried out and his mother came into his bedroom. She sat beside him on the bed, asked what was wrong, began stroking his hair with her hand. And then she began singing this song which comforted his childhood and was comforting him now in the land of cancer:

*I am Jesus' little lamb,
Ever glad at heart I am . . .*

Through his tears and trembling, he said he began to sing along with her – and feeling better with every verse:

*For my Shepherd gently guides me,
Knows my need and well provides me,
Loves me every day the same,
Even calls me by my name.*

*Day by day, at home, away,
Jesus is my Staff and Stay.
When I hunger, Jesus feeds me,
Into pleasant pastures leads me;
When I thirst, He bids me go
Where the quiet waters flow.*

*Who so happy as I am,
Even now the Shepherd's lamb?
And when my short life is ended,
By His angel host attended,
He shall fold me to His breast,
There within His arms to rest.⁵*

And that assurance for this life here and now, and that promise of resting in His love forever in His Kingdom to come – that, finally, is what Jesus’ question, “*Do you want to be healed?*” is meant to evoke in us. What we are meant to hear in that question is our Good Shepherd’s never-failing care for us in all the circumstances of our lives. What we are meant to hear in that question is His desire for us to know that we really are safe in His care. And that we really shall be, when He has finished His work in us, healed and made whole. And what we are meant to hear in that question is His promise that even now He is working, as His Heavenly Father is working, to lead us from death into life. New life here and now, and eternal life in His Kingdom to come. “*Do you want to be healed?*”

¹ John 3:1-17.

² John 4:1-15.

³ John 4:46-54.

⁴ John 14:6.

⁵ Walter Wangerin Jr., *Letters from the Land of Cancer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), pp. 14-20. Follow this link to hear this hymn: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qJjDyC1sdw>.