

Jesus' Great Questions: Do You Want to be Healed?

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John 5:1-9

In his book, "Space and Sight", Marius von Senden tells the story of the first people in the world to undergo successful cataract surgery. All of them blind for years, they suddenly received their sight. Their stories about the experience were wondrous and moving and some, quite sad. They described a world the way a new born baby or an alien might upon seeing it all for the first time. One newly sighted girl was shown some photographs and then some paintings by her mother. "Why do they put those dark marks all over them," she asked. "Those aren't dark marks," her mother responded, "they are shadows."

A second girl was so stunned by the radiance of the world that she kept her eyes shut for two weeks. When she finally opened them she saw only a field of light against which everything seemed to be in motion. She could not distinguish objects, but gazed at everything around her, saying over and over again, "Oh God! How beautiful!"

But not everything was beautiful for these folks. Unable to judge distances, they reached out for things far away or cracked their shins on pieces of furniture they perceived only as patches of color. The world turned out to be bigger than they had thought – bigger and infinitely more complex. Unable to control it, many fell into depression. Seeing themselves in a mirror for the first time, some became terribly self-conscious about their appearance while others refused to go out at all. The distressed father of one young woman wrote to her surgeon that his daughter had taken to shutting her eyes when she walked around the house and that she seemed the happiest when she pretended to be blind again. A fifteen-year-old boy finally demanded to be taken back to the local home for the blind. "I can't stand it anymore!" he said. "If things aren't altered, I will tear my eyes out!"

He wanted to tear his eyes out? After being rescued from a world of darkness and presented with a world of color, depth, movement and marvelous sights? Why? For some it was just too much – too much to see, to do, to be. It was better before in the darkness – smaller, quieter, familiar, safer.

"Do you want to be made well... do you want to be healed?" Jesus asked all kinds of questions, but this one is surely one of the silliest. Do you want to be made well? What kind of a question is that? The man had been ill for 38 years! Now here he was, next to a pool filled with what was believed to be healing water, but was unable to get to it. It seems the water only had healing power when it was "stirred up" – popular belief was that it was stirred by an angel; modern day commentators suggest it was a subterranean spring. But whatever it was, time was short. And this weakened man seemingly was shoved aside by others every time. Not a pretty picture – sounds like a rather rough and degrading spectacle, the pushing and shoving. And this man didn't stand a chance. Living with healing just out of reach seemingly had become a way of life for him.

But then Jesus comes along and asks, "Do you want to be healed?" Again it seems an absurd question to ask a sick and disabled man who has dragged himself to a place known for its curative powers, and had waited there, we are told, "a long time." He must have wanted to be healed – right? But when I hear his response to Jesus' question, I'm not so sure.

I am blessed with pretty good health and I try to not take that blessing for granted. I don't like to get sick... most of the time. And yet, I can think of times when I was down with some 24 hour bug, sick, but not real sick, high temperature, some aches and pains. I was able to stay home in bed without apologies for tasks left undone or meetings unattended. And even as I declared to the world my eagerness to be up and back at the tasks at hand, there was also an undeniable relief at being able to drop out for a while without guilt or accountability.

Now lying in bed watching reruns on TV is hardly the same as lying helplessly next to a pool day after day, but it does give one a glimpse of the same perils and temptations. The man has an interesting response when he is asked if he wants to be healed, which is to say, he

doesn't come right out and say, "Yes, of course." Rather he begins complaining that he has no one to help him and that others keep pushing ahead of him. I don't want to sound totally insensitive here, but in response to Jesus' question, the man starts whining. What would have been wrong with a straight yes or no answer? Says Margaret Guenther, a seminary professor in the area of spiritual direction, "It must have been miserable lying beside the pool. (My imagination always adds swarms of flies to the scene) At the very least, the sick man must endure tedium and isolation in the midst of a crowd. After a few days or years of trying to get into the pool first, perhaps he has stopped trying and accepted defeat. Perhaps a ritual of going through the motions has become his daily routine. No one can criticize him for not trying; things just aren't going his way. Yet however uncomfortable and bleak the wait, it may be safer and more attractive than accepting healing." Really? Easier to remain sick and miserable than accept Jesus' offer of healing?

Warning – old joke. A man goes to a psychiatrist and tells him, "Doctor, we don't know what to do about my brother. He thinks he's a chicken." The doctor wants to know how long this has been going on. "Oh, about five years." "Five years! Why didn't you come and see me sooner?" The man says, "Well, I would have, but we needed the eggs!"

I suppose that could be said of all of us. To be human is to need the eggs – which is to say to be human is to be ambivalent, we can want and not want at the same time, we can seek healing and resist it, can drag ourselves right to the edge of the healing pool and then find a thousand different reasons for not getting in. As those formerly blind people discovered after having been dramatically given sight, healing can bring radical change, it can be difficult, frightening, challenging. At least that man by the side of the pool knew what to expect every day, as bad as it was. He was both shielded and depleted by his illness. No one expected anything of him, there were no demands, no surprises. Why should he risk losing this small bit of security for the unknown and changed world his healing would present him with? What might be expected of him, what might he expect of himself? Indeed, if we read on, we discover that just hours after the healing the man is in big trouble. The religious authorities are on his case about carrying his mat on the Sabbath and pepper him with questions about his healing, as if he has done something wrong. Not hard to imagine him thinking that life was easier by the pool. Why didn't I just play it safe and leave things the way they were?

But Jesus doesn't seem to be too interested in playing it safe or in surrounding himself with people who play it safe. "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Stand up, he is calling you. What are we going to do? How to respond? Because this is the choice he presents us. Do you choose to see or not to see; get up and walk or stay safely by the pool? Says Barbara Brown Taylor, "How will we have it? You can stay where you are. Sit with what is familiar, where all the edges are rounded off so you won't hurt yourself, where you need only concern yourself with what is within your reach. You do not want to make a spectacle of yourself, after all, and getting up and walking probably won't work anyway. No sense getting your hopes up. Stay with what is familiar, with what you know. Or you can spring up, cry out and ask for your heart's desire. Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead, and good riddance to caution, to propriety, to the fear that keeps you down and where you are. Are you willing to see or not; to walk or not?"

Clearly, being touched and blessed by Jesus may not mean our lives are suddenly successful, at least not as society defines success. As the man at the pool discovered, Jesus may make life harder, but in ways that matter. He gives us problems worth having. And when we experience hard things on his account that just may be when we begin really to know him. It is taking the chance and opening ourselves to others and to God. It is having the courage to be vulnerable, and to find that life is not most lovely when it is least dangerous, nor most beautiful when it is only safe. It is allowing ourselves to be touched by the presence of a God who later may ask us to do something truly worthwhile with our lives. Clearly Jesus does not believe that God's work of healing and wholeness should be deferred or put off to some future time. And the man by the pool, in spite of all his hesitation, finally seems to understand. He stands up, takes his mat and walks. And never looks back at that pool again.

What, you say you have not been invited? Take heart! Get up, he is calling you.