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Do you want to be well?  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
July 24, 2022  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 5:1-18

Today's gospel reading - on the surface - seems a bit strange. We do not have healing pools today, do we? Well, not exactly. But does anyone here enjoy a day at a spa? Does anyone here enjoy hot springs, or mineral springs? Does anyone like spending time in a hot-tub? For many years, pools of water have been used by people for various purposes. Including spiritual cleansing, personal restoration and even, for healing. Many people have "taken the waters" for the sake of their health.

And so, the story in John today is perhaps not so strange to us after all. The action happens at a place which in Aramaic is called "Bethesda".

[image: Bethesda ontario]

No, not Bethesda, Ontario which is north of Toronto, but Bethesda, currently located in the Islamic quarter of Jerusalem. People would go to Bethesda for healing. The waters did not provide healing all the time. But on occasion, the waters would be "stirred". And at that moment, tradition states that the first person who entered the waters would be healed.

[image: pool of siloam]

In our story Jesus meets a man who has been waiting 38 years for healing. This is one of those stories where I find myself wanting to have a coffee with this person - to get his whole story - to get his full life history. I want to know more about him. At what point in his life did he realize that he needed healing? What else has he been doing in the last 38 years? What sort of healing does he want? What other healing methods has the man tried? And what is preventing his healing - beyond his inability to get into the water quickly.

But we do not get those details. In fact, we are told very little. We know that the man wants healing. We know that the man has been waiting a long time for that healing. We know that the man believes that he needs help from someone in order to find that

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healing. And we know that in 38 years, nobody has ever helped the man in exactly the way that he wants to be helped.

The man says he wants to be well, and yet, something seems to be missing. The man's complete strategy for his healing is to get into the water when the waters are stirred. But the man explains very clearly to Jesus why his plan is doomed to failure. The man explains, calmly, rationally, logically, why his own plan for healing actually makes no sense. And yet, the man has persisted in his plan for 38 years. Something does not add up.

In response, Jesus heals the man of his mobility issue. Cool, right? But did you notice the second healing in the story? The second healing also happens to the man with the mobility issues. The healing around mobility is important, of course. But I think we usually completely miss the second healing in this story. Which is a pity, because the second healing is perhaps more important to the man than his mobility healing. And moreover, the second healing is something that all of us can relate to. The second healing is very likely a healing that each of us needs ourselves.

So what is the second healing in this story? The second healing happens in a single line. A line that on the surface reads more like a segue than as part of the narrative. The second healing is initiated when Jesus asks the man, “Do you want to be well?”

[image: impossible figure]

Jesus is saying that - given all the evidence - perhaps the man does not really want to be well. And I am forced to agree. Why does the man persist in a strategy for healing that seems entirely unlikely to succeed. Ever. As I said, the man has a long list of logical, practical, sensible reasons why being in Bethesda cannot possibly lead to healing for him. So what is he doing there at all? And what has he been doing there for 38 years?

[image: fitness excuses don't burn calories]

The man is a bit like a person - and we all know people like this - who say that they want to become more physically healthy. And yet, they never walk, or exercise, or eat better, or do anything at all that would actually impact their health in a positive way. Like that proverbial person who says, “I go to the gym almost every day. I almost went on Monday. I almost went on Tuesday, I almost went on Wednesday” and so on.

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[image: exercise program]

When someone claims that they want better health and they make no lifestyle changes, we can only conclude that the person is not actually interested in doing what it takes to improve their health. Or to be more blunt, such a person is not actually interested in becoming more healthy.

Be honest. If the only exercise you ever get is jumping to conclusions, you probably do not really want to become more physically fit. And by the same token, the man in the gospel story does not seem to really want to be well.

[image: insanity]

Sitting beside a healing pool you know you cannot get into quickly enough seems like a definition of insanity. Or perhaps the man does not really want to be well in the first place. Perhaps the personal cost of being well seems too high. And Jesus cuts right to the root of the problem by asking the man if he really wants to be well.

[image: leper]

I'm reminded of an unpopular Jesus story. It's about a person who became a leper. And as a leper, they quickly realized that the only occupation they could engage in was begging. And so, the person became a beggar. But one day, the person met Jesus, and Jesus cured the man's leprosy. Wonderful news, right? Life changing, right? Well, no. Because after the person was cured of leprosy, they continued to beg. Begging, which had originally been a response to leprosy, had become tied to the person's identity. Curing the leprosy did not stop the person from begging. The person did not embrace "being well". The man in fact resented being made well again. The person actually accused Jesus of taking away his livelihood as a beggar by healing his leprosy.

[image: life of brian]

Granted, that story is not found in the bible. It is found in the 1979 Monty Python movie "The Life of Brian". But I believe that the story is also found all around us. Perhaps in our own lives. Perhaps in our collective lives as United Church congregations here in Brantford.

Sometimes, although we say we want to be healed, the personal cost of being well seems too high. Or perhaps our "illness" has become part of our own identity, and we are

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unwilling to give that up.

[image: pushing tin movie]

I'm reminded of the movie, "Pushing Tin" from 1999. Pushing Tin is a story about personal development and the struggle between two New York air traffic controllers.

[image: pushing tin competition]

During the movie, one of the controllers, Nick, starts to see every aspect of work as a contest between himself and another controller, Russell. They are both very good at their job. And they both seem to enjoy besting each other. Handling more aircraft on a shift, or squeezing aircraft into small holes in the sky in order to get more planes on the ground during their shift. Nick and Russell will cut corners to grab planes to control. They "push tin". This is perhaps not the best movie to watch if you have any anxieties around flying.

[image: nick cracks]

At one point during the movie, Nick cracks up. He makes some mistakes with a few aircraft. He has an affair. His wife leaves him. Basically, his whole life falls apart.

Eventually, with help from Russell, Nick figures out that his healing will come - and does come - when he stops trying to control everything. As an air traffic controller, his response to bad situations - to his whole life really - is to maintain control. Controlling everything had become part of Nick's identity. It was hard for Nick to learn that not being in control was a source of healing. But for him, it was.

And at a turning point in the movie, Nick pleads with Russell to help him get his life back in order. And Russell uses the words of Jesus. Russell asks Nick, "Do you want your life back. Do you really want your life back." Nick agrees. And Russell takes Nick to an airfield, and the two men stand on the end of a runway while a 747 makes a landing over their heads. Standing under a jet while it is landing is not usually recommended because the turbulence can blow you completely off the runway. But Russell selects that location to help Nick learn about control.

[image: 747 landing]

While they are waiting for the approaching aircraft, Nick asks Russell, "What do I do, should I brace myself, should I relax, should I lean in". And Russell says, "There's a 747 coming at you. You can wiggle your ears and clap for Tinkerbell, it wouldn't make

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any difference. Don't you get it?" And Nick finally understand. Nick says, "I get it, the attempt to hold onto sanity too tight is insane. To gain control you have to lose control."

And then, the turbulence from the landing 747 blows Russell and Nick right off the runway of course. But Nick had begun to heal, even as he lay beside Russell, bleeding and bruised in the grass beside the runway. Nick was bleeding. But he was starting to heal from his need for control.

Do you want to be well? I think for most of us - it is not obvious. Sure, if we have a cold, we want to be well. But often the difficulties and struggles in our own lives are not so much a disease we want to cure, but more an indication of who we are. And generally, we are comfortable with who we are. Our afflictions in life - over time - can become part of our own identity. And at that point, the question, "Do you want to be well?" becomes much harder to answer. The question, "Do you want to be well?" becomes much more interesting. And often, our honest answer would be, "no".

Nick's problem was his need to control everything. But each of us has our own internal struggle where we have to choose between maintaining our own personal status quo and finding the healing we want.

[image: wellness]

I do not want to leave this conversation as theoretical. I want to discuss "do you want to be well?" in two contexts. One is personal, and the other is collective.

Let's start with the personal. Consider our gospel story again. The man who claims to want healing has a long list of sensible, practical reasons why he cannot get the healing that he says he wants. Does that sound familiar to anyone? Think of a situation in your own life where you can create a long list of sensible reasons why you cannot find peace in your life. Perhaps someone injured you in the past. And you have been refusing to forgive that person. Maybe you are thinking that of course you want to forgive that person. And you will forgive them. But only after they do a very specific thing first. In other words, you want to forgive that person, but only after they change. You demand that the other person has to change first, before you will consider forgiving them. And how long have you been waiting for that other person to change? 38 years? Long enough, anyway.

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But remember that offering forgiveness to someone else is like unlocking a door to set someone free and realizing that you yourself were the prisoner.

Often, we get stuck because we can create a long list of sensible reasons why we cannot find the healing we want. And if this sounds like you, I have no doubt that your list is logical, sensible, practical. But my response to your list is, “Do you want to be well?” Would you rather find healing? Or would you rather sit back and feel self-justified in your pain? Many people I know would rather justify their pain instead of finding healing. And if you are busy justifying your pain, you will not find healing. “Do you want to be well?” Really? And if you do struggle with forgiveness, please join our forgiveness group happening over the next 2 weeks. And if you struggle with something else, reach out to any one of the ministers in our 4 congregations. We are all here to help.

You deserve healing. The only real question is, “Do you want to be well?”

I’d also like to discuss whether or not we want to be well in a collective sense. Today is very exciting for me. Because for the first time ever, I am preaching to all of the United Churches in Brantford. I came to Sydenham-Heritage just in time for COVID, and I do not know the other 3 congregations as well as I would like to. But I will try to say something that is meaningful for all of us. And if anything I say is not true for you, please speak to me over coffee time. I would love to learn more about all of our congregations.

As congregations, do we want to be well? What is Rev. Paul even talking about? I’m glad you asked.

My sense of the 4 United Church congregations in Brantford is that we are all struggling to engage with new people. Brantford and Brant County are growing as we speak. And none of us are collecting very many new members. I suspect that in fact we are all shrinking. We are all shrinking in terms of our membership, our finances, and most importantly, our energy. We are becoming less vital within our own walls. And we are also becoming increasingly less relevant to our community. We are not well.

And - like the man in the gospel - I’m sure that all of us have our own long lists of logical, practical, sensible reasons why we do not want to change. Why we do not want to engage with the new people that God is sending to us.

So what is the plan here? Are all of us content to simply shrink away over time?

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Are each of us just waiting, and hoping we will be the last one standing? Are we, like the man in the gospel, content to sit and wait for something we know is impossible?

What is the alternative anyway? Well, I do not have the magic answer for you of course. And no, Sydenham-Heritage is not cooking up some great scheme ... or if they are, I do not know about it.

But to me, it is obvious that each of our congregations have unique gifts and passions. And that perhaps we would have more impact on our community if we worked together more. If we leveraged the gifts that each of us can be to ourselves, and to our wider community.

I have spoken with many people about how or if our 4 congregations might work together a bit better. And I have heard long lists of logical, practical, sensible reasons why we - here at Sydenham-Heritage cannot work with .... well to be honest, any of the other 3 congregations. And I have no doubt that each of you has your own long list of sensible, practical, logical reasons why you cannot work with Sydenham-Heritage either. But my response to all of those lists is: "Do we want to be well?" Is our desire to be well strong enough that we are willing to learn from and share with each other? Because we would be stronger if we worked together better.

Since we are sharing worship together this summer, I hope that each of us takes time to look with open eyes to see the real gift of each other. Our strengths, our passions. All four of our congregations have real gifts. Let us celebrate those gifts.

Do we want to be well?

Amen.