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Do you want to be well?  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 5:1-18

What do you think of the gospel reading today? For me - on the surface at least - it seems a bit strange. I mean, we do not have healing pools today, do we? Well, in many ways, we actually still do. 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.

The idea that water can be “special” has been around for a long time. Think of Holy Water for example. And the idea that touching holy water will impact your life. I know people who only drink distilled water because they think that is the best for human health. I know people who only drink mineral water - for the exact same reason! And of course, water is the only essential ingredient needed for a baptism.

We use many types of waters for various forms of healing. Sometimes the water is to be immersed in. Sometimes the water is to be sprinkled. Sometimes the water is to be drunk. Many people have “taken the waters” for the sake of their health. And so, the story in John is perhaps not quite 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 a bit north of Toronto, but Bethesda, 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

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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 is waiting for 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 else in order to find that 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 issue. 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: street art impossible]

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,

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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 the 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.

[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 being more healthy. They are not really interested in their own healing.

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. The story is 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, actually. 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

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actually accused Jesus that by healing his leprosy Jesus had taken away his livelihood.

[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. 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 not willing to give that up.

[image: holding anger]

I hope that some of you think I’m a bit crazy here. Why would anyone choose to not find healing and peace in their own life? Great question. Here is a story about an acquaintance of mine. I’ll call him “Jim”. Jim, who is my age, has always lived at home. He was devastated when his mother died about 5 years ago. But he also held a lot of anger. He was angry because he is convinced that the medical community made mistakes that brought on his mother’s death. I saw him a couple of months ago, and he was visibly still very angry. He kept saying, “I have every right to be angry”.

[image: holding anger quote]

And in once sense, yes of course Jim has the right to hold his anger - if he wants to. But on the other hand, why would anyone choose to live a life holding anger instead of finding ways to find peace. The whole situation reminded me that when I knew him much better - 40 years ago - he was pretty angry back then too. Part of his identity is being angry.

And I’m not picking on Jim here. Many of us carry self-destructive behaviours that over time become part of our identity. And that can become a barrier to the healing that we might need.

[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

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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: pushing tin 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: pushing tin 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 any difference. Don’t you get it?” And Nick finally understands. 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.

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[image: don't complain about things you are not willing to change]

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?" Also becomes much more interesting.

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 and deserve.

Let me put it this way. Most people do not like change. And if you have been living with an issue for a long time, that affliction has become part of your identity. In order to find healing, you would need to change. That's the dilemma. Healing requires change and change is not always welcome, even if it would be beneficial.

[image: wellness]

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 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.

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 create long lists of sensible reasons why we cannot find the healing we want. And if this sounds like you, I have no doubt that your

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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 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? Do you really want to be well? If so, please reach out to me or to a trusted friend. Because we all deserve the healing that we need. We all deserve to find peace of mind.

The only real question is, “Do you want to be well?”

*Amen.*