

Practicing Our Faith: Healing

*A sermon preached on John 5:1-9 on Sunday, October 18, 2026,
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I.

This week, we crossed a rite of passage in my house. A few days out from his 10th birthday, Silas took a crash landing while playing football with his buddies at recess, and broke two bones in his wrist. It was a rite of passage as our family's our first trip to the ER with a kid; somehow we made it nearly 14 years before doing so. From start to finish, Silas was a champ. Encouraged by his friends and teachers, attended tenderly by his doctor and nurses, and cared for by his siblings, somehow it has been as good of an experience of pain as one could hope for, now with a cast bearing the names of many to cheer him on. The path of healing has led through a healthy dose of meds, resetting the bones, wrapping a cast, a follow up appointment, and four weeks of stillness to be made well once again.

Not to minimize his pain – I too have had broken a wrist before, and it's no walk in the park – but oh that all our aches and pains, sufferings and wounds would have that straightforward a path toward healing! If only real healing of body and spirit could come with a cast and four weeks of rest! But we know that healing isn't the same as curing, that what ails us is often far deeper and more complex than a break that needs a bandage. For those of us with visible ailments, to the outside world, we know that we can too easily *become* our illness – not the person with cancer, but the cancer patient, the bipolar guy, the allergic, the feeble, the injured, the survivor – and yet inwardly, we wither under such a diminished identity of suffering. And for others of us whose suffering lies below the surface where it can be more easily hidden or tucked

away, we run the risk of masking it so completely that we move through the world without anyone knowing of our inner pain.

Healing is complicated, isn't it? I know you remember the times you have longed so deeply to be made well, for a loved one to be made well, your heart sick with worry of the worst and your spirit screaming out to someone to 'do something!' You recall the stinging doubts of God's love and care, the questions and resentment and utter depletion of your faith when healing does not come as you so desire it. You know intimately how injurious societal ills are to our human capacity to live peacefully with one another, how fear of one another can grow like a tumor toxic and even terminal to our hearts. And in it all – personal, relational, communal – we all cry out for the Great Physician to heal us: heal our bodies, our minds, our loved ones, our country, our world, and in so doing, make us well.

II.

Everyone in Jerusalem knew the Sheep Gate, that pool called Bethesda where the sickly liked to congregate. Rumors had it that the pool had healing powers, that if ever the water churned up, it was as if an angel had passed through to stir the waters for someone's healing. The first to jump in would receive the miracle. No wonder it was a popular spot.

That's where Jesus encountered a man who, as the Gospel of John notes, had been ill for 38 years. And among all the ways he could approach this man, Jesus did so with the kind of question that echoes throughout the centuries. *Do you want to be made well?*

It's the kind of question that would catch anyone off guard, a question thick with perception and implication and all that lies just below the surface. I have to imagine the man was taken aback by it. Did he wonder if Jesus was

implying that he wasn't already seeking healing when he placed his body every single day? Was Jesus subtly suggesting that the man somehow was choosing to remain stuck in his illness, that it defined his identity? Did he feel a pinch of truth beneath the daily pain? The man responded circumstantially, describing what impedes him in the way of wellness, his scope as narrow as the landscape around him. "There's no one to take me to the water," he says, "and people who get in the way of the path." He hems and haws, but doesn't actually answer the question. Jesus is not asking circumstantially, he's asking holistically. *Do you want to be made well?* What do you want?

III.

I don't know about you, but I know that I feel the pinch of that question in places I'd rather ignore or overlook. I imagine this pinch is universal, not just for the invalids at the gate. Because one of the first things that pastors learn and forever know to be true is that everyone is hurting. Everyone's struggle is real. Everyone's wounds are painful. Everyone walks around with shame or trauma, long-standing suffering or fresh pain, or grief that never gives a moment off. Not just the obviously wounded, or the clearly struggling, or the openly injured, or the emotionally afflicted. Everyone. "We are all veterans of pain of some kind," Ted Loder says, "broken dreams rattling around in us. All of us are stitched by scars."¹

Jesus understands this as he asks through time and space, to the man in front of him and the countless humans who live since and still: *do you want to be made well?* How do you think you would answer that question?

Do you want to be made well from everywhere your life has flattened into a two-dimensional, dulled shadow of what it could be? Do you want to be made

¹ Ted Loder, *The Haunt of Grace*, p92.

well from the thing that dances circles around your mind, and hardly gives your ruminations a moment off? Do you want to be made well from the way your pain swallows every corner of your life, where you cannot move or dream without feeling the tightening of its grip? Do you want to be made well from the grief that has walked you to the wild edge of sorrow and tinged every step in that path with your tears? Do you want to be made well from the relationship whose rupture has stained the inner lining of your heart?

Perhaps you yell quickly, “yes Jesus, yes I want to be made well!” Who among us wouldn’t choose wellness when pain is the alternative?

It’s not like you haven’t been trying. Maybe it’s not 38 years by a healing pool, but it’s praying every day for something to happen only for it not to. Or pleading with God for everything from passing the test, to not getting caught, to finding oneself, to saving a beloved’s life, to ending the pain ... grasping at whatever straws we can find only to experience a fresh wave of anger and resentment when the miracle does not occur for you. “Pain happens in the flesh,” Barbara Brown Taylor says, “but suffering, on the other hand, happens in the mind.”²

In those suffering minds, we ruminate. Maybe I didn’t have enough faith. Maybe it’s that I didn’t pray enough, or believe enough, or read the Bible enough. Maybe God is punishing me for my sin, or withholding from me deep and abiding joy, or giving someone else the happiness that I long for just to teach me a lesson. Maybe God forgot about me. Maybe God isn’t even there at all. For when we conflate being made well with being cured, somehow we will always be disappointed.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, p161.

So let's look again. Let us not overlook that in Jesus' miracle stories of which this is one, the curing of the ailment or the attention to the affliction is only *part* of the work. Yes, the woman's bleeding stops; yes, Jairus's daughter gets up; yes, the storms are calmed, and the blind man sees, and the lepers' sores pass, and the unclean spirits depart. Yes, the paralytic walks, and the bent-over woman stands straight, and the five loaves and two fish multiply, and the nets fill up. Yes, these things happen in the life and work of Jesus, not because of the heroic efforts on the part of the healed to receive it, but because of who God is, and what God values, and the way God works for restoration and new life. God is in the business of making well.

Because in each of those instances I just named, curing becomes healing when those on the receiving end of the miracle glimpse that a new way of being is dawning in their life, when they grasp the completeness of this reversal that has happened, when the community participates in the healing. "Stand up, take your mat, and walk," Jesus tells the man at Bethesda. I love that Jesus didn't scold or shame, he didn't refute or defend. Rather, he directed. He empowered. He reminded this man of the agency that is inherent within him. You have a role in your continued well-being, he seems to say. It asks something of *you*, something you have to activate and tend – not just something that God does for you! It requires your participation and will lead to transformation and healing.

Remember that we never find out what ailed the man at Bethesda, why he pined by the pool for 38 years in hopes of healing. When he stood and walked, he could have still limped. He could have still had the bad knee or the fuzzy eyes or the shoulder that always hung a bit low in its socket. But what we do know is that he no longer felt like healing was outside of him, because now it was a part of him. Now he put one foot in front of the next and walked. Perhaps the healing

loosened him from the paralysis that kept him poolside and wanting. Perhaps his agency empowered another friend by the pool to stand up and walk themselves. Perhaps the healing for you and me is the same, loosening us from whatever holds us in its grip. No longer will anxiety be in the driver's seat. No longer will trauma have the final word. No longer will depression pull us underwater when we're grasping for air. *We want* to be made well, and with that knowledge and the agency that God gives to us, the work of healing begins.

IV.

So how do we practice healing?

Well first of all, I want to suggest for us today that we let Jesus's question spin around in our spirits this week. "Do you want to be made well?" Think about where in your life that question pinches you and admit it – at least to yourself, even better if you admit it to another person. Perhaps it's a rhythm or habit that is dulling rather than enlivening you. Perhaps it's a way of being that has just grown up around you like weeds that take over a yard, and you need to find the emotional lawnmower to carve a way out. Perhaps it's a perspective you cannot shake about your pain, and you need to face the way it is beginning to define you. Whatever it is, let that question ring in your mind like the clarity and precision of a bell. Consider your honest answer.

You have to do this step before you quickly move to helping someone else, for you know as well as I do that sometimes it's far easier to place your help outside of you than to face the very thing that is not well within you. Sometimes we need to help others before we can help ourselves, but I want you to try first to do your inner work. Once you look yourself squarely in the mirror, then allocate some of your energies elsewhere. Maybe it's helping someone in your community who just needs a hand getting to the proverbial healing pool. Maybe

it looks like getting out of their way. Maybe it becomes questions you ask of the systems keeping us unwell. You know the powers and principalities in this world have lots to gain by keeping us sick and tired. For who can even be made well when insurance companies would rather nickel and dime your ailments than invest in your health? Who can even be made well when we come home from work and collapse into the couch in a puddle of anxiety and overwhelm, and then numb our jumpy mind with screens in our hand and on our wall? Who can even be made well when our body politic feels more like a blood sport than a chance for communal well-being? So maybe you pay close attention to where systems aren't set up for healing, and do your part to be a cog in the spokes. I love the sentiment in this haiku from John Paul Lederach, who said "don't ask the mountain to move, just take a pebble each time you visit."³

Once you've considered healing in yourself and the systems around us, then bring that good energy into community. One scholar said it best: "faith is not only a relentless commitment to the betterment of people and situations. It is also the creative ability to find a way to that betterment. And the point is this: the full range of human creativity is exercised in pursuit of healing."

What then does that creativity look like? Well unlike Jesus, we may not be able to speak a word and bring about a cure. Even for the doctors and nurses and caregivers among us, there is no magic in our hands. And yet — when we join together with one another in acts of restoration of the body and the soul, we become part of God's work of healing in the world. We heal with a warm casserole brought to the table where cancer has served a cold meal. We heal as we mow the lawn of a friend with chronic illness, or give a full-time caregiver in our life a night to care for themselves, or hold court in prayer for a loved one in

³ John Paul Lederach,
<https://onbeing.org/programs/poetry-from-the-on-being-gathering-john-paul-lederach-oct2018/>

surgery. We heal when accompanying a friend to AA, or showing up for a friend who's depressed. We heal when we tell the truth about our life out loud and let another into the suffering we're carrying. We heal when caring for ourselves with the fullness and ferocity we do for others. We heal when we acknowledge the wounds we knowingly or unknowingly inflict, the ways in which we participate in systemic injustices that let some in and others out. We heal when being made well is the hope that never dims.

And the church, when we are at our most honest and beautiful, becomes precisely the space for such healing in community to occur. I see that right here with you, right with your very lives. You do this week in an week out, as seasons come and go, you still show up for each other. After Earl's stroke and Deb's wreck. After Lily and Daniel got sick. After the marriage ended. After the relationship began. After the baby that knocked your whole life off its axis. After the diagnosis, the treatment, the recovery. After it felt like every bone in your body, heart, and soul was breaking and it all might fall apart. And on and on. You have healed each other. You have healed me. Together, God in Christ is making us well.

The late Rachel Held Evans once said, "the thing about healing, as opposed to curing, is that it is relational. It takes time. It is inefficient, like a meandering river. ... And the truth is, the church doesn't offer a cure. It doesn't offer a quick fix. The church offers death and resurrection. The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation. The church offers grace."⁴

Thanks be to God for the amazing grace that makes us well. Amen!

⁴ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, p208-209.