

The Wholeness Question: Do You Want To Be Made Well?

John 5:1-15

Most of us are flattened by life from time to time. Something comes along -- some disease, some circumstance, some broken relationship, some loss -- something comes along that knocks us off our feet and sends us staggering through life.

The man in our Scripture lesson was flattened permanently, so it seemed. There he was among a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed. We don't know precisely what was wrong with him -- but he has had this infirmity for thirty-eight years. He couldn't get up and walk -- he was on his pallet, waiting there beside the pool of healing water, hoping that someone would put him into the water when it began to stir, and the healing power was there.

This story is one of the grandest messages of the Christian faith -- one of the most relevant. Not only is Jesus able to forgive our sins, but he also is able to heal us, to free us from the chains that bind us, to set us free. It's to these people, those who have been "flattened out", that Jesus goes when He's celebrating the feast in Jerusalem.

So, it's one of the most fascinating stories in the New Testament. At the heart of it is one of Jesus' questions which we are considering during this Lenten Season: "Do you want to be made well?" This is the wholeness question. In this question, and in the entire episode there are two primary signals that speak to the issue of wholeness. Those signals are will and faith.

The first thing Jesus does with the man in our story is to challenge him to focus on his will. That's the point of the question, do you want to be made well?

This is the citadel of our personhood -- our will, our capacity to say yes and no, our freedom to choose. So, Jesus made a frontal attack: "Do you want to be made well?" This is a question that pierces to the very core of who we are -- it calls for a decision, an action, not the presence of a passive wish or vague desire, but an exercise of will.

God will never deliver any one of us against our will. Not only is that a significant question as it relates to our wholeness, but it's also a central theological question -- the matter of freedom. Every person must say, "I will," to the Christ if they're to be the recipient of the grace that redeems.

In our story, every day an angel would come and stir up the water. It was when the water was stirring that it had healing power, but the man couldn't get in. Jesus came not to stir the water, but to stir the man's will. Over those long years of being an invalid, long years of disappointment and apparent hopelessness, the man's will had been numbed. So, Jesus addresses that essential point of who we are: Our will.

So much of our healing and wholeness -- spiritual, emotional, physical, relational -- depends upon will. This is the wholeness question: "Do you want to get well?" It's not only the question that relates to our physical wellbeing. It certainly has to do with relationships. The exercise of our will is essential for wholeness.

The primary barrier to wholeness is our self-pity. There are real possibilities here that the reason this man had never been healed is that he really didn't want to be healed. I think that is suggested by Jesus asking the question, "Do you want to be healed?"

Did Jesus know that the man enjoyed and was comfortable being sick? Did Jesus know that self-pity had been a source of comfort for that crippled man? I think He did. In its extreme, self-pity becomes destructive causing us to become neurotic and paranoid. We begin to see all things as a plot to destroy. We feel that everyone is out to do us in, to hurt us.

If we mire ourselves in the mud of self-pity, we will remain bound and paralyzed and life will pass us by.

Let me mention something that is akin to self-pity that I see as a very common malady, and another barrier to wholeness. It's cynicism.

Now let me confess that it's very easy to become cynical, and a degree of cynicism may be healthy. It's easy to become cynical, but cynicism is crippling. It, too, can become a cop out on responsibility --a barrier to wholeness. Along with self-pity, it's a great barrier to wholeness.

The first signal that speaks to the issue of wholeness is will, we must want to be whole. The second is faith. There is no healing, no wholeness apart from faith.

In Our story. Notice the movement that Jesus orchestrated in the life of that man. He asked him first if he wanted to be made whole. He wanted to stir up the man's will. Next, He called on the man's faith: "Rise, take up your bed, and walk." It's significant that He didn't give the man's faith any outward assistance. He simply called it forth. He didn't take him by the hand and lift him up; He told him to get up. When the man obeyed -- when he acted in faith -- he discovered a new strength. In fact, Scripture says, "Immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked."

Now let me be quick to say that faith does not always bring healing in terms of physical and emotional cure for our maladies. I think we need to be careful even in talking about this. There's a mystery that surrounds it all. But here's the point -- because some people are not physically and emotionally healed from the particular malady that has them in its grip, does not nullify the place of faith in our wholeness. We can know wholeness even when we're limited. Even when we are physically ill, even when we may be experiencing emotional distress, faith is a big key.

This healing is not just about the body or the mind or the emotions. It's about the soul. It's about washing away all the residue of sin so we can see more clearly.

By will, the desire to be whole and by faith this man in our story is made whole.