

First Presbyterian Church
John 5:1-15, “Do You Want To Get Well?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson 5/25/2025

I think you know this, but, just to make sure: I’m just a person just like of you.

Which means, in addition to all the good stuff that comes with being people,

I also make all the same kinds of mental errors and mix-ups
that any other person makes.

Many of you are thinking, “We know. We’ve spent time with you.”

Okay, but I am also prone to mistakes when it comes to
biblical and theological topics – the thing I’m supposed to be better at.

Today’s text is a case in point. The lectionary passage only goes through v. 9,
but the story obviously continues through v. 15.

So when we read this passage with my Bible study,
and we got to v. 14 where Jesus says,

“Oh, I see you’re well and walking about the temple.

Don’t fall back into sin or something worse might happen to you,”

I had an immediate reaction against it.

Am I the only one?

I said to the group, “Well, now I know why the lectionary cut the passage short –
it’s because Jesus says something crazy at the end.”

My reaction was because I felt really bad for this guy
who had been paralyzed for 38 years.

And I thought it was an awful thing for Jesus to imply that

A) sinning had something to do with it as well as

B) that something worse might happen to him
if he doesn’t stop sinning.

We can’t very well have Jesus walking up to people and threatening them, can we?

Often times when it appears that the Bible is saying something
that seems at odds with God's love and mercy through Jesus,
the issue is that we just need to understand
the historical context better,
or think more deeply about the bigger point being made, or something like that.
I thought, surely this was one of those cases – it couldn't really be
that Jesus is warning this fellow not to sin
or something worse could happen to him.

In the days since then, I've realized that I was in error.
I thought I knew better than Jesus.
I put myself in the place of telling Jesus what he ought to be saying
rather than, in humility, learning from what he plainly does say.

And that's really important for us, spiritually, to remember.
If we aren't careful, we will go from being made into the likeness of Christ,
to making Christ in the image of ourselves.
We can easily make Jesus into a savior who shares our personal preferences.

So let's continue on with that caution in mind ...
lest something even worse should happen to us!

Jesus is given a tour of the pools near the Jerusalem sheep gate,
encounters this man, and is told he has been there for 38 years.

Let's consider the situation this man was in.
He was unable to move for 38 years, pushed into an area with others.
This isn't a nice place. This isn't a place of dignity.
It's a place of shame.

We still have these places – where people who are injured, incapacitated,
lacking resources, lacking capacity to move forward in life, gather together.
Some people, tragically, live their whole lives there.

At a human level, there is compassion for his situation.

“Do you want to get well?” Jesus asks.

His life is very difficult, and from his reaction to Jesus,
it’s clear he sees himself as trapped.

He replies with a complaint about not getting enough help
to move into the pool when the waters are stirred up.

Now, this is a hard sentence to understand, which I believe is why
some later editors of the Bible added a sentence of explanatory context
in v. 4: “*4 From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down
and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such
disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had.*”

This verse is removed from modern translations because it simply wasn’t there
in the older and more accurate texts.

So we shouldn’t treat it as authoritative, but it might still help us
with some of the folklore that seems to be in play in this scene.

So, this poor guy is complaining he can’t get to the pool fast enough
to be healed when the waters are stirred up.

It’s not his fault, he’s a victim of others being helped first
(for 38 years), and there’s nothing he can do about it.

Jesus clearly loves this man and wants him to be well,
that’s why he speaks to him and heals him.

But Jesus does not seem to have much regard
for the healing powers of the pool,
nor the man’s sense of helplessness.

He calls him to participate in his healing by standing up,
picking up his mat, and walking.

Might sound easy to some of us. It’s no easy thing to be done
when you haven’t stood for nearly 4 decades.

This is in front of everyone else he spends his time with,
this is about his core identity as a man of the Bethesda pool,
and ... this is about what is allowed and not allowed
on the Sabbath day.

It's *Jesus*' idea for this guy to pick up the mat.

And Jesus knows it's the Sabbath and that this is a prohibited work activity.

But Jesus' concern is for the heart of the Sabbath – which is restoration!
Not with the extra rules of restriction that the Pharisees have put
around the Sabbath to protect it.

The man is interviewed by these religious authorities:

“Who is it that told you to break the Sabbath?”

And he didn't know, because Jesus had slipped away into the crowd.

The religious leaders didn't care that the man had been healed –
only that the rules were broken.

And later on, when they learn it was Jesus who had healed the man,
they added this Sabbath violation to their case against him.

Control and restriction are terrible things to let take control of our religion.

When the church acts in a way that keeps others under our thumb,
which has happened in issues of race and gender
and sexual orientation for centuries –

we have to realize that we're on the same path as the people who crucified Jesus.

Remember when I said at the beginning that we need to be careful
not to put ourselves in the place of telling Jesus what he ought to say?

This controlling form of religion is doing that, too.

This is, to be sure, the most grievous sin referenced in this passage.

But it's not the only sin referenced.

In v. 14, Jesus does say,

“Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”

Stop sinning ... which implies, he has been sinning.

Something worse ... which implies, the sin is connected to his condition.

Now other places in the Gospels,

Jesus *breaks* the connection between sin and illness or life circumstances.

So we know that not *all* human conditions are a result of wrongdoing.

But some are connected. When we live against the grain of God's love,
we bring things into our lives and the world

that diminish our bodies, relationships, and environment.

In this sense, most of our sin brings some kind of bad consequence.

Now there's this matter of the 38 years. One person I referenced

said this had something to do with the time Israel wandered in the desert
before entering the promised land.

I thought, "No way! Israel wandered for 40 years, not 38."

But then I discovered the words of Moses in Deut. 2:14,

**"Thirty-eight years passed from the time we left Kadesh Barnea until we
crossed the Zered Valley. By then, that entire generation of fighting men had
perished from the camp, as the Lord had sworn to them.**

Wow...38 is a very specific number of years. Then I found this quote
from William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940s.

**"So long Israel wandered, unable to reach the promised land. It is not only
individuals but nations that lose strength, yet may receive it again from
Christ. Not only a nation, but a 'Church.'"**

I'll let you think about that for a moment...

Now to this question of Jesus, "Do you want to be well?"

I think that's the heart of it.

You see, I've got this pinky issue that requires a shot of steroids
to make the node on my tendon go down. And until that happens,
I don't have very good grip strength, my finger pops
when I squeeze it too much,
and I've got inflammation in my joints.
So what I need to do is go in to see the doctor.
The question could be asked, "Do I want to be well?"
Of course I want to be well. But I haven't called the doctor yet.

The question could be asked of someone who has an addiction.
(You probably know, this is not primarily people we see who are homeless –
most addicts have a good income and stable shelter.)
The addiction impacts their relationships, their work, their life goals,
everything becomes linked to the addiction.
And let's say this person isn't in a 12 step group or seeing a counselor.
The question could be asked, "Do you want to be well?"
"Of course I want to be well. But in order to be well,
I would have to let go of the thing I am clinging to for relief
of every fear and worry I have."

We could ask a couple who are in a co-dependent relationship and swing wildly
between conflict and reconciliation, "Do you want to be well?"
Sure, they want to be well, but are they willing to change
their relational framework and their enmeshed identity in order to heal?

Or someone who is facing a financial crisis because they have refused
to live by a budget and cut back on splurges and vacation
so they can keep up with the lifestyle they think is "normal"
but which is really unsustainable.
Do you want to be well? Yes – but are they willing to live within their means?

Look at the person who is enraged with their neighbor
because of their political support for the opposing political party.

Their hatred and contempt leaves them seething and bent out of shape,
wishing all kinds of bad things for their neighbor.
They use names like “snowflake” “cuck” and “MAGAt”
to dehumanize this person who is beloved by Christ.
They are locked up in chains by their anger, and their desire to control the world.
Jesus may ask them, “Do you want to be well?
Do you want to be able to live in the freedom of the spirit?”

“Yes,” they say, “I want to be well.”
Then they must forgive their enemy
and do good to those who persecute them.

This can go on and on. do you want to be well, is a human question,
it’s about healing and restoration.
It’s also a spiritual question that involves repenting from sin
when our lives are out of balance.
And it’s a communal question when the people of God have lost the path of faith,
but instead lean on their own understanding, power, and judgment.

And so, when Jesus meets us and asks, “Do you want to be well?”
and then gives us the command to act on faith in a way that moves us
toward wellbeing and away from our sinful pattern of life,
we need to hear it for what it is.

An invitation to healing that comes along with repentance.
It’s not a magic trick that leaves us saying, “How did you do that?”
It’s the Spirit of God joining us, renewing us, and strengthening us
as we reject the road we were on before,
turn around and point ourselves toward God.

Do *you* want to be well?