

Text: John 5:6: “When Jesus saw him lying there and knew he had been there a long time, he said to him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’”

IF YOU read the gospel lesson carefully, you will note something a little strange about the encounter between Jesus and the man at the pool of Beth-zatha. We might say, to make this story a little more familiar to us, it is an encounter between Jesus and the man in the hospital—a hospital for chronically ill patients.

Whenever a writer of the gospels bothers to provide us with specific details in a story about the ministry of Jesus, we do well to pay close attention. We are told some specifics about the place—by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, one of the gates to the city, there is a pool. By the pool there are some porticoes—specifically, five porticoes. To the porticoes come people with disabilities and chronic diseases.

The pool is probably a naturally occurring spring or bath, because the text tells us that from time to time the water in the pool is agitated. And we are meant to understand the healing powers of the waters in the pool are thought to be increased when the water is stirred up by the activity of the spring.

All of this information is packed into the few brief lines we heard this morning. From this we make a simple conclusion: that the people for whom this story was first written were not familiar with Jerusalem, and so they needed it described to them. For them, Jerusalem was not only the city of the great temple and the capital of the Roman authority; it was a place of God’s powerful presence, a place where the spiritual and the physical worlds lived in very close proximity to each other.

And here is another detail worth our attention: the man whom Jesus is addressing has been ill a very long time. Not just a for a while; not just for a long time; specifically, for thirty-eight years.

Being ill for thirty-eight years would be a long time for any of *us*—to say nothing of someone living in the ancient world. The tour guides will tell you that the life span of someone living in the Jerusalem of Jesus's day was thirty-five years. That's not quite right, because a very great deal depended on who you were in society. Everyone, rich and poor, Roman and Jewish, suffered from terribly high rates of infant mortality. Women died in childbirth far more often, and Roman men had a bad tendency to die on one of Rome's many battlefields.

Still, for a Jewish man in Jerusalem, to be ill for nearly four decades meant to spend most of your life both poor and suffering. For all that time, for all those years, he has just wanted to find a way to get into the healing water when the springs stir it up. And for thirty-eight years, he has never once had a turn in the water. Everyone else pushes in ahead of him.

What is interesting about this is that this man has actually forgotten what his problem is. That is what becomes clear in his exchange with Jesus.

For thirty-eight years he has been trying to get into the water, and failing every time. And what has happened to him over all that time is that the problem of getting into the water has become the problem he is most focused on.

If only he could get to the water, he would be able to get food for himself. If only he could get to the water, he could get a job. If only he could get to the water, people wouldn't treat him so poorly.

There is this thing he has become completely focused on, and it is all he can see in front of him. It is the water that he can't get to. That is what he thinks his most important problem is.

He has forgotten that his problem isn't that he can't get to the water. His problem is that he can't walk. His problem is that he isn't well.

Jesus comes into this picture and asks him a very simple question—or so it seems. Do you want to be made well? What is wrapped up in that simple question is a deep well of understanding. Jesus sees the man; he sees his age; he sees his situation; he sees what is separating him from the life he wants to have. The question Jesus asks contains and transcends all of that and comes right to the heart of the matter. Do you want to be made well?

But that is not the question the man answers. The question the man answers, the question he is focused on, is why he hasn't been healed yet. He is focused on a solution that hasn't worked, for thirty-eight years. He doesn't answer the question Jesus asks him because he's asking the wrong question of himself.

This seems to me a little bit like the relationship Jesus has with the church. Jesus comes into our midst, into our story, and sees the whole of our situation, our context, our history, our worries.

And we are ready with our answers. Our answers are things like, people don't join organizations anymore. Our children all have screens in front of them all the time. We are all too busy, and the world demands so much of us. Our church is sort of a mystery to the people around us, and a mystery to the Episcopal church itself. Being a church is hard.

Those are the answers we have. In just two months in the Convocation, I've heard those answers repeatedly almost everywhere I go.

But you know—I'm pretty sure that none of them are answers to the questions Jesus is asking us.

Jesus isn't asking us why people aren't joining our church, or why our children aren't more involved. Jesus isn't asking us why we don't come to church more often, or how the people outside here look on us. Jesus isn't asking us about how the particular laws in Germany pertaining to churches makes it hard for us to do what we do.

Those are the answers ready to leap to our lips, but they are not the question Jesus is asking us. The question Jesus is asking us is: Do you want to be a disciple?

Do you? Do you want to be a disciple? Do you want to try to live as though you really trusted God? Do you want to walk the way of love, not when it means that you will be loved, but when it means that you will show love even when you may not feel loving?

Do you want to be a disciple? Do you want to share what you have found here with others, not because you know you're right and you think they're wrong, but because in it you have found a truth about the power of God's transforming love to overcome even our certainties?

Do you want to be a disciple?

We are so ready to answer almost any question *other* than that one. But that is the question we are being asked. You, and me, and St. Boniface, and the Convocation and the Episcopal Church, and the whole Christian world.

Said differently, we're being asked: What is most important to you? The things we have been trying to do over and over and over, that sometimes don't work all that well?

Or responding to the call of disciples to trust radically in God's love, God's message, and God's mission?

This past March I attended for the first time a meeting of the House of Bishops, the gathering that takes place twice each year of all the bishops in the Episcopal Church, from Taiwan to Europe and everywhere in between. One of the speakers that Bishop Curry invited to address us was a woman who is a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in fact the first woman to be elected to that ministry in her church.

Bishop McKenzie stood in front of a room full of Episcopal bishops and said, “You know, most of us aren’t preaching Christianity in the church on Sunday. We are so worried about the church, and what we end up preaching is *churchianity*—the idea that somehow the church is the message and not the Gospel.” She said this in front of a room full of bishops—the sort of people who have kind of made their whole lives about, you know, the church.

But I have a feeling she is more right than not. And I am coming to believe that if we actually listened, deeply, prayerfully, to the question Jesus is asking us, we might find ourselves resurrected in ways we can’t even imagine.

That may be why we hesitate to risk it. We want some idea of the scale of what might change. We love our faith, but we also love the traditions that helped us find that faith. There are things we don’t want to lose.

But still there is this question before us, the one for which we need to have an answer as ready as all the other answers we have. Do we want to be disciples? Do we want to take up our cross and follow, knowing that the only things that get resurrected are things that die? Are we willing to risk trusting that God has already figured out how to get us into the pool?

I hope so. I pray so. I hope you pray so, too. *Amen.*