

“Do You Want to Be Made Well?”

John 5:1-9

Richard C. Allen

March 15, 2015

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Sometimes a spiritual encounter takes the form of a confrontation or an intervention. Such is the case with the man who has been sitting by the pool of healing waters for 38 years. No doubt Jesus has come by this pool of healing water many times before and has seen this man sitting there. No doubt Jesus wonders why he's still there after all those years.

When Jesus confronts this man, asking the pivotal question, “Do you want to be made well,” the man replies with a litany of excuses. Someone always cuts in line. Others are faster than I and reach the waters before I can get there. I seem to have bad luck. No one will assist me. I want to be healed but excuse after excuse tumbles out of his mouth. He has amassed 38 years of excuses!

Jesus has a way of slicing through all the excuses and gets right to the heart of the matter: **Do you want to be healed?** I call this a confrontation. The evidence would suggest that this man has not really wanted to be made well. He seems to believe there is some convoluted benefit to his remaining unable to walk. Perhaps he thrives on the pity of the community. Perhaps he has allowed his paralysis to so identify him that he wouldn't know who he is if he were healed.

Jesus just senses that the way to love this man is to confront him. “Do you want to be healed?” This can be the most loving question imaginable! And I would say that it takes courage for this man by the pool to say, ‘yes’ I want to be healed.

It will mean a whole new way of life, a whole new identity, a transformation for which he may or may not be ready.

Yet, the healing relies on this man's own desire to be made well. An observer would think this is a 'no brainer.' But it's not a 'no brainer.' No one has ever loved him in this confrontational way. He hardly knows how to respond.

There is an invitation here to let the man by the pool be a symbol of resistance to healing of any kind of malady. He might be one addicted to alcohol or to other drugs or to gambling. He represents that curious resistance to being made whole. In Alcoholics Anonymous there is a saying that one has to reach the place of being sick and tired of being sick and tired before there is a desire to be made well.

So, sometimes what is required is a loving intervention. And that is what we are witnessing in John chapter five. From that place of loving all humanity, Jesus intervenes into this one man's 38 year avoidance pattern. Imagine how well established is this 38 year pattern! I can just picture this man blurting out his excuse one more time: 'But, every time the waters swirl, someone else beats me to it!' And then I see Jesus glaring at this man, eyeball to eyeball, letting him know, 'I am calling your bluff', letting him know that he won't be swayed as everyone else has been swayed.' And in the face of this profound caring, the man consents to wanting to be healed.

He reminds me so much of my Uncle Perry. Uncle Perry dated Lorraine for about eight years, though it seemed like 38 years. They were obviously in love. But he was obviously afraid, paralyzed, by the thought of commitment. When Lorraine could wait no longer, a victim of Uncle Perry's insecurity, she let him know that he had until the end of that year to propose, or else it was over! Now, this was a very loving intervention! It was risky!

But it was so loving. I believe he proposed to her the very next day! I remember attending the wedding!

And later, much later, reflecting on this event, I thanked God for a woman who cared enough to initiate a loving intervention with a man paralyzed by the fear of intimacy. Perry and Lorraine are both gone now. But their story is alive and well. Their story connects them to this Bible story. It is a story that gives birth to hope.

And that is what John had in mind as he wrote this story and included it in his Gospel. Hope is born whenever someone cares enough to intervene in another's addiction with the simple question: Do you want to be made well? For, often, this is where the healing begins.

Now, we can take this story quite literally or we can take it more symbolically. When I allow the story to speak more symbolically, I see the man at the pool as one who is paralyzed by anger. In my life experience, it is anger that is the most common source of paralysis, the most common thing that separates us from being fully alive, fully healed, truly whole. It is anger that separates us from our loved ones, from our neighbors, and even from God. In some mysterious way, anger is easier to hold onto than to let go of. And it's easy to come up with 38 reasons to not let go.

So, the ministry of a local church could be a ministry of loving interventions wherever anger or rage abide. Maybe we could designate one room as the healing pool room where there's a punching bag and padded walls and a shouting chamber. Maybe we could tune in to the places in the community where anger festers and offer a loving intervention. "Do you want to let go of the anger? Do you want to be healed?"

It seems to me that Jesus found his way into the lives of those who deep down wanted to be whole but maybe didn't want to do the work required, or maybe just didn't want to let go of a familiar friend such as anger or alcoholism or addiction to gambling. His ministry took the form of a loving intervention. Churches see themselves as Christ's body in the world. So, I find this story compelling. It speaks mightily to local churches. It helps us to see our ministry as a ministry of intervention, lovingly raising the question: "Do you want to be made well?"

This is where the text took me this week. Jesus encountering the man by the pool outside the city gate is one of those spiritual encounters that is a breath of fresh air, a window of promise, a reason to remain in the greatest of hope! Amen.