

Going Home

First Congregational Church, Branford

John 5:1-9; May 26, 2019

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Just prior to today's scripture story Jesus had healed a royal official's son who was at the point of death. Jesus told the official, your son will live. The man believed Jesus. His son lived, and the official and his whole household believed.

After this, there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

Ya know, on the day before Memorial Day, that choral anthem (*The Journey [Going Home]*) alone could've served as today's message.

So many have gone home, haven't they? So many who were killed in war, some who later died from injuries, and so many more who lived after the war, for a year or 10 or more. They've all gone home and we memorialize them, and give thanks for their sacrifice. For those who didn't die on the battlefield, they got to look forward to goin' home to see a mother, a father, a brother, sister, a sweetheart. After the wretchedness of war, they gave thanks for the simple gift of walking through a screen door, to see that face again, those arms, to be with the ones who hold your memories. *Mother's there 'xpectin' me, father's waitin', too, lots of folks gathered there, all the friends I knew.* What a full-circle journey the soldier makes.

Christians believe we're goin' home. It's not far, just close by, through an open door. I think that's what Jesus tried to point to when he was between both worlds - he just walked through an open door - trading one life for another. That simple. Goin' home, to your real home.

In today's scripture, the man who had struggled with his body for 38 years wanted to go home to good health! With several knee and hip replacements of late in the congregation, I thought of you who have been in such pain with your hips or

knees. And, the healing you've received from surgery! You're given brand new life. Ya know, before they started these replacement surgeries in the 1960's, people would've been in a wheelchair. ('member Grandma?) Praise God for the many new paths of healing that keep being discovered! I've learned that surgeons have gotten knee replacement surgeries down to 45 minutes! People walk the day of surgery. Amazing. Amazing world. Amazing United States. Thank God for all of the pioneers.

Before I get into the story, I want to make a *really* important point about being blind, or deaf, or paralyzed or having special needs. People develop extraordinary depth of insight in other ways. *Not everything needs healing*. What *does* it mean to be made well? Maybe it mostly has something to do with expanding our heart for kindness. If you get nothing else out of today, maybe get that - that maybe healing mostly has something to do with your heart getting as big as it can get for kindness.

In the story, we don't know what the man's physical ailment was, but it had persisted and it kept him from moving into the pool. For 38 years he was trying to make his way, trying to journey to that pool, but someone else always stepped down ahead of him. Isn't it interesting, and sad, how no one in 38 years made way for this man? Everyone was so focused on their own healing, I guess. *I want to make sure I get mine, everybody get out of the way, I need to be first for the handout, I'll beg, borrow, steal, plead to get mine... even at the expense of my neighbor getting his...* even at the expense of *my neighbor* getting his. Ouch. Thank God our servicemen and women operate on a higher level. They put us first.

Maybe an aspect of healing is to put someone else over our needs. We may be very good at putting a son or daughter or spouse's needs over our own, but what about our neighbor? Maybe when we risk stepping aside and letting a neighbor get theirs before us, there's a blessing in it for us. Jesus said, love your neighbor... as you love yourself. Love can motivate us to look to see who might be more in need than we are. *You go first, no after you. I'll wait*. When I quiet the *me first* inside of me (and that *me first* is big in me), but when I quiet it, like I tried to do at the post office yesterday (I just kept smiling!) - when I stop putting my needs first, I can actually *feel* healing taking place in me. I *go home* a little.

No one has this man's back. But, Jesus comes in and zeroes right in on him. He just knew. He always does. He's our guy. The Savior. He asked the man a simple question, *do you want to be made well?* The man relayed how on the rare day when his body would let him move in incremental inches, someone beat him to the pool. For 38 years he believed the pool to be his source of healing. We don't really know about this pool, but waters stirring reflected popular beliefs that spirits were responsible for the inexplicable bubbling and the healing that resulted. Jesus

doesn't need the pool! He's not locked in on any one way of healing. You know, like we are when we say, *no, I have to get my healing this one way. From this one doctor, or this one therapist, or to get married, or to get this job.* We're so focused on what we think we need for our healing, right? *If I had the money, if I had the friends, THEN I would be healed. That's how I can "go home, be well."*

But, Jesus doesn't operate within those limitations. We're looking this way for our healing, and then whoosh it comes in the back door. Like it does for this man.

Get this - the man doesn't even know who Jesus is, doesn't ask Jesus to heal him, doesn't have faith in Jesus. In some healing stories Jesus asks for a demonstration of faith. But, not here. Jesus doesn't say, if you say your hail Marys, if you spin around five times and touch your toes, if you confess me as your savior, then you get to go home. There are no limits to the compassion of Jesus. Did you hear that? People like to put limits on Jesus - he only gonna heal ya if ya believe in him. But, Jesus is gonna compassionate who he wants to compassionate!!!! Okay?!!!

Jesus comes along and says, I know you've been focused for 38 years on what you thought you needed for your healing, but I'm here today to free you from your thoughts: Stand up, take your mat and walk.

The man doesn't say, I can't do that! I can't walk! There's no long list of excuses. He just did what Jesus said to do. *Do you want to be made well?*

Sometimes we may get more out of not being made well. People may feel sorry for us, they may wait on us. Maybe we get a lot of attention. If I get well, whose going to make my sandwich?! Jesus comes along and offers, *do you want to be made well? Because I'll show you the way.*

Now, an *integral* part of the man's healing is this: Jesus instructs, *stand up, take your mat, and walk.* That *mat* is the reminder of where he came from, and what Jesus did; and *hopefully*, it will keep him humble to the needs of others. It's like, don't just get your healing and walk away. Right? Remember!

Remember when Jacob wrestled with the angel? Jacob won, but the angel struck him on the hip socket and Jacob's hip was put out of joint - and he was left with a limp. That limp was his mat. Jacob got a blessing, but his wound would remind him of his *need* for God. Paul the Apostle was transformed into a new man on the Road to Damascus when Jesus appeared to him in a great light. But, Paul was left with a thorn in his flesh - whatever that thorn was, God would not take it away - Paul had to walk with it. And, God told him, *my grace is sufficient for you.* I'm not gonna heal it. My *grace* is sufficient - for you. So, ya see, maybe not everything is meant to be healed.

Jesus calls to me in my grief over losing my mom, *stand up, take your mat and walk. You're going to have to walk with the wound of death. Like everyone*

else. He says, *let the loss soften you for others who lose a mother. Take your mat and walk.* I took my mat and walked with the Bennitt family yesterday who grieves their mother Claire. They could hardly believe I was in grief, too.

FCC must walk with its mat, the wounds it has endured. The Christian church must walk with its mat, the decline in church attendance. There are a great many thoughts as to what's wrong with the church, and what should be done, but maybe we just walk with our mat, *God's grace sufficient*; keep feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger - doing justice, loving kindness, and *walking humbly with our God.* *That* will get us home.

And, for you, personally, whatever *going home* means for you, may you get there, by whatever route necessary. Amen.