

A Sermon by N. Sellers, preached at First Church, Branford on 2-28-16

"Made Well"

John 5:1-15

A number of years ago, Martin Copenhaver who is the president of Andover Newton Seminary and the former senior pastor of Wellesley Congregational Church in Massachusetts, wrote a book called Jesus is the Question; the 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered. In it he writes, "Contrary to common assumptions, Jesus is NOT the ultimate Answer Man, but more like the Great Questions. In the Gospels, Jesus asks many more questions than he answers... [He] prefers to ask questions rather than to provide direct answers." (Intro., xviii) Not only this, but contrary to how Jesus is often portrayed, he isn't a guru offering spiritual tips. He does not give us a neat list of ten ways we can be closer to God, or provide the easy answers we'd prefer. Instead, he asks hard questions, more like a Zen master whose questions take us beyond the obvious to something deeper:

"What are you looking for?"

"Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives?"

"Do you love me?"

"Why could you not watch with me one hour?"

Jesus is more like the prophets of the Hebrew texts, who railed against the ruling authorities and sought justice by asking the hard question. Or sometimes more like Socrates, who taught people simply by asking probing questions. (*Ibid.* intro xxii)

You may remember something of the Greek philosopher Socrates who lived in Athens between the years 469 and 399 BCE. Despite being considered one of the greatest and most important philosophers of all time, he left behind no writings, and following the Peloponnesian War, his life ended when he was forced to drink the poison hemlock for the treason of "corrupting the young," that is, for asking too many questions. What we know about his life and his work comes from the writings of his disciples, Xenophon and Plato. And any of you who have read about him in Plato's Dialogues, know how difficult they are!

Socrates is best known for patterns of questioning, whereby he engaged his students in an endless search for truth. He sought to get at the foundations of a person's views by asking questions until a contradiction was exposed which proved the fallacy of the initial assumption, thereby moving closer to a true meaning. The ultimate goal of this "Socratic method," was to "increase understanding through inquiry." Obtaining an enhanced freedom to think through a process of discarding bad or incomplete ideas is the overall goal of the Classic style of the Socratic Method. (www.socraticmethod.net, *Intro to the Socratic Method & its Effect on Critical Thinking*, M. Maxell)

As described by Lauren Winter in the Foreword to Copenhaver's book, linguists note that questions have many different functions in conversation: Questions elicit information; they inspire people to discover something new, to unearth new knowledge. Questions can also persuade, as in the courtroom setting where questions are asked which make an argument, developing a trail of thought which persuades the jury. In fact, questions

stimulate thought, which is why good teachers ask questions of their students rather than simply lecturing. (Foreword, xii, xiii)

We might also notice that questions forge intimacy. There are times when you leave a conversation and in light of the many questions that have been shared, you end up feeling much more connected to the person with whom you were speaking. Those questions have helped to reveal mutual interests, or spark shared curiosity. There's a sense of collaboration, of more than just information explored or exchanged... Questions certainly help build relationships and perhaps this is another of the main reasons Jesus is always asking questions: it's one of the ways he created intimacy with people around him. (*Ibid.*)

When Jesus finds a lame man, lying by the side of a pool of water in Jerusalem during one of the Jewish festivals, his first question to him seems surprising: "Do you want to be made well?" Unlike many of the healing stories in the other Gospels, here in John and with nearly every other healing story elsewhere in the book of John, Jesus initiates the conversation, with insight into the man's condition of having lived a long 30+ years of as an invalid: "Do you want to be made well?" At first pass this seems like a really silly question, don't you think?: If you have been disabled for 38 years, and been absolutely frustrated time and time again in your attempts to get yourself into this healing pool ahead of all the other people who are waiting to jump in ahead of you, wouldn't you THINK that being healed is what you want more than anything else in the world? Why didn't Jesus ask something like, "Do you want help getting into the pool?" or "Is there something I can do to help you get better?" We may be tempted to think Jesus has really blew it here, sort of like asking a thirsty person if they need a drink?! Of course!! 'Yes Jesus, I want to be made well,' but as we will notice in further exploration, the man's reply is focused on the only way he can possibly envision being healed, and that's through a dip into the pool. Not everyone wants to be healed – maybe it's easier for this man to make a living as a beggar. There are people for whom the reality of illness is preferable to dealing with some of the deeper aspects of existence...

But what if Jesus is up to something different than missing the chance to ask the right caring question? What if this is another situation that tells us something about the essential nature and purpose of Jesus, something which all of the gospels seek to communicate using their own particular styles? Over the next three weeks, I want to take a closer look at some of the questions Jesus asks as a way to encourage our own questioning in our spiritual lives, especially in the season of Lent. Along with Rev. Copenhaver, I have come to understand that hard questions provide an incredible opportunity for God to change us; they are an invitation to further reflection. Where answers will sometimes close things down, questions provide an opening... We might observe that even the word *question* contains the word *quest*. That is, a question sends you on a journey in search of something of meaning or value. This is a noticeable aspect of another one of Jesus' favorite teaching tools – the parables, where indirect communication asks the listener to do some of the work in gaining insight. Rather than lecture to communicate a body of

knowledge, Jesus sought to elicit new understandings from his listeners. His goal was and still is transformation rather than mere information. (*Ibid.* xxiii)

Which brings us back to the disabled man whom Jesus begins to question on the portico by the pool at Bethsaida. Sounding very much like a physician meeting a patient in an exam room, Jesus wants to know if this person really wants to be made whole. In the ancient world where there was no division between the physical and the spiritual, Jesus' whole-being approach is focused on reaching out to address both aspects of this man's experience. He asks a highly collaborative question on the way to this healing: "Do you want to be made well?" More than a mere informational question, this is a way of inviting the man into a healing partnership: "Will you bring yourself into this relationship with me?" meaning, "Are you willing to work with me here?"

This expression "made well" will function as a refrain throughout the rest of the story, for it is found again in verses 9, 11 and 14-15. While this man responds to Jesus' questions through his own presuppositions about how healing might be accomplished on his behalf, Jesus responds to his complaint with three imperatives: rise, take up your bed and walk. (v. 8) There's no mention of faith on the part of the paralyzed man here, as there in the Mark 2 account where a paralyzed man lowered down through the roof of a house is healed in response to the faith of his friends (2:5). He is at once, completely healed. He picks up his mat and starts to walk. Jesus' words are exquisitely effective: the man is "made well" and does exactly what Jesus commands of him.

The rest of this story focuses on the aftermath of this miraculous healing, for the Jewish authorities take issue with the fact that the newly healed man is carrying his bedroll on the Sabbath in direct violation of Sabbath prohibitions against doing any work on this formal day of rest. When Jesus reappears in the story, it is as the healer who seeks out the former invalid, confirming the reality that he "has been made well" and mentioning the topic of sin. This gives readers - both ancient and present company included - the chance to notice that our healing does not seem to involve forgiveness of sins; it seems wrong to read Jesus' words in verse 14, as supporting the traditional old covenant understanding that linked sin and illness. In fact later in John, chapter 9, Jesus explicitly rejects this connection, when others try to insinuate that a blind man's disability is linked to the sins of the previous generations of his family. He urges that the man's healing needs to be about more than just the physical. To be spiritually healthy, or "be made well" he needs to henceforth avoid sin; his transformation includes freedom from such burdens, if he is willing to persist. (NIB. vol IX, Abingdon pp. 579-580) When the healthy man returns to the authorities and announces that it was Jesus who had "made him well," it's not to turn Jesus in for causing the Sabbath violation, but rather to recognize that through Jesus' mercy and power, a miracle has taken place. Restored to health, he is now faced with the new challenges of a normal healthy life. Without getting into that rippling pool of water, he has received a cleansing. Something he could not even conceive of a moment or two before as Jesus asked him about being made well, has now taken place!

There are many, many different stories of healing encounters between Jesus and the people of his day, and there are a number of different conclusions we could draw, most of which would draw us into another sermon for another day! Our healing story in John 5 does not provide much insight into why disease and illness strike in people's lives, or why the hardships of poor health are something that even those with deep faith are not able to overcome, without a direct experience of God's power in their particular situation. With Isaiah we are brought to the place of recognizing in humility that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, not are our ways, God's ways. (55:8) The measures of right and fair and just are determined by the Holy One, and "being made well" in body and spirit, is not something we are always in control of.

Yet this story about the healing question of Jesus, "Do you what to be made well?" points to the considerable reward of spending time with the questions Jesus asks. One thinks of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke who offered his famous advice to a young poet:

"Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer." (*Letters to a Young Poet*)

There is some partnership we play in the experience of transformation! Getting into the heart of Jesus' question, doesn't mean we must seek the one true meaning as might have been revealed by employing the Socratic Method, repeatedly paring away till we reach the "answer" about what the healing of the paralytic man in John 5 really means. Rather Jesus calls us to live the questions now; to place our trust in the one who seeks us out with love and mercy, with a desire to offer a wellness that overcomes our dis-ease. May we place ourselves before the question of Jesus, this week "Do you want to be made well?" May we live into the deeper answers that God is willing to provide? Amen.

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