



“Do We?”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

John 5: 1-18

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During our Lenten exploration of encounters with Jesus in February and March, one of the encounters we looked at (on a couple of Sundays, in fact) was that of the death and resurrection of Lazarus in John 11. As a reminder, John makes clear that Jesus has a close relationship with Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Word gets to Jesus that Lazarus is dying, but Jesus seems to wait a bit before heading to Bethany to get involved in the situation. In the end, by the time Jesus finally does arrive, Lazarus has already been buried in the tomb for four days. Both sisters (one at a time) share their grief with Jesus – Jesus himself weeps over the death of his friend – and then the story comes to its fruition when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead and Lazarus emerges from the tomb. It’s an intriguing story to say the least – and something of a foreshadow of the experience of Jesus that is soon to come – but it was in our Wednesday discussion group about this text that a fascinating question was asked. As we explored that particular moment of Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead, one of our participants asked, simply, ‘Was Jesus really doing him a favor?’

I know I’m not alone in saying that I’d never considered that before, and others in the room were similarly taken aback by the query. Was Jesus really doing Lazarus a favor when he raised him from the dead? Take a moment to consider that. If we reflect on the heavenly peace and glory that we claim to be next upon the end of our earthly life, would Lazarus really want to come back? Was this really something that was a great gift to Lazarus? Or, perhaps, was that act more about the sisters, the grief, and the community around them than it was about doing something for Lazarus, himself? Now, I’m going to leave that as something of an exercise of reflection for us, as I don’t think there is clear or simple answer to be had. That said, beneath that query is a more fundamental reminder of what comes from, because of, or after the miracles Jesus performed, and what came next for the beneficiaries of that abounding grace. And that is what brought me back to this moment in John 5 in which Jesus asks what seems to be, at first glance at least, an utterly absurd question. “Do you want to be made well?”

It’s a fascinating inquiry that Jesus brings to that lame man camped out beside the pool. Try, if you will, to picture the scene of this encounter...

This story takes place at the edge of Jerusalem, near the pool that our translation names as Bethzatha. The thing to understand, however, is that the edges of the Bethzatha pool were lined with individuals suffering from every form of infirmity – disease, illness, injury, disability – they

all surrounded these pools and waited, vigilantly, for the waters to move. There was, now and then, something that would cause those waters to stir. And it was the belief of many of the Jews of this time that when this happened – when the waters started to agitate – that it was the work of a healing angel of God that was enlivening the water. It was the belief, then, that the first person (and only the first person) to jump into the water at the moment of this agitation would be healed.

So, what we have here is something of a gathering place of those who were ill and diseased, injured and lame, all camping at the edge of these waters, hoping to be the first to jump in the moment those waters moved. The particular man with whom Jesus speaks, however, was sick in some way that made him immobile. So, while he camped at the edge of these waters, dreaming of the healing that could come if only he could be the first in, the truth is that he had no chance. He couldn't get himself into the water, and by the time he could actually find someone else to carry him, another would have long before beaten him to it. So, after 38 years of his infirmity, this man continued to camp at the edge of these waters and dream of a healing that is but inches away, and yet completely out of his reach!

Enter Jesus! If you really think about it, it seems beyond ridiculous that Jesus would ask the question that he asks. To a man who's been ill for 38 years – to a man who's camping, day after day, at the edge of the Bethzatha pool – to a man who's watched as others have beaten him to the dream he, himself, so desperately longed for – to a man who has no hope but to spend his life sitting right at the brink of the healing he desires – Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well?” Really? That's the big question? It's like asking a child if they want an ice cream cone! That's what really drives the image that I get of this man in his response to Jesus. Sitting by that pool, longing for that miracle he simply cannot attain, I imagine him looking towards Jesus, flabbergasted at the absurdity of the question, jaw dropped all the way to floor, adopting the sarcasm of a teenager as he exclaims, ‘Do I want to be made well? No, not really. I just like sitting here with heat beating down on me day after day, unable to attend to my basic needs, because that's all kind of fun for me.’

Now, we know what happens at that point. We read on as Jesus heals him and the story continues from there. But, it's fascinating to consider the question. How could Jesus actually ask this lame man, sitting at the edge of those healing waters, if he wants to be made well? Of course he'd want to be made well. He's been ill for 38 years. He's done nothing but camp beside this pool day after day and his life is little but dreaming of living the healed life that has forever remained just beyond his reach. How could Jesus ask that man if he wants to be healed?

Well, that's what brings us back to Lazarus. At the risk of coming across as cynical, there's always a catch! The poignant thing about that question that was asked about raising Lazarus from the dead is that we never really consider that he might in fact have preferred to stay where he was. His resurrection served his sisters' sorrow. It served Jesus' grief. It served the Gospel in powerful ways. But, that healing – that resurrection – came with a catch for Lazarus that may or may not have been what he would have otherwise chosen. And we don't really think about that.

The truth, however, is that there is almost always that catch. Think about this man at the edge of the Bethzatha pool. He's been ill for 38 years. He's known no life but the life of sitting around that pool day after day. He's dreamed of living a healed life, but he's immersed in living the only life he'd ever known. So, consider the implications – healing his body goes so much further than giving him the ability to walk. Healing his body changes his life – it changes everything.

- If this man is healed, there's no reason to camp by the pool for even a single day more.
- If this man is healed, the state of being he's known for 38 years disappears.
- If this man is healed, he can pursue those dreams he's constructed in his mind, but the only life he's ever known becomes an instant memory.
- If this man is healed, he can't camp by the pool, he can't dream of unattainable glories, and he can't live off the charity of others for another day.
- If this man is healed, his life changes in every way, the life he's known ceases to exist, and all he has been and all he has done has to be re-invented in light of the healing that he has received.

It seems, on the surface, to be such an absurd question. 'Do I want to get well?' 'Of course I want to get well, why do you think I'm sitting here.' But, if you think about it, it goes so much deeper than that. 'Do you want everything that comes along with getting well? Do you want the responsibility, the challenge, the newness, the unknowns? Do you want to redefine your life in light of the healing you have received? Are you ready for everything that comes along with that healing?' Are you ready for the catch?

It's not unimportant to consider the second half of this story in John 5. Picking up where David left off...

Now that day was a Sabbath. 10 So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." 11 But he answered them, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.' " 12 They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take it up and walk'?" 13 Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. 14 Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you." 15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. 16 Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the Sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." 18 For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

This second portion of the story draws our attention to the timing of the Sabbath and the conflict that this creates with the Jewish teachers and leaders. Note that what brings that to bear, however, is this man carrying his mat (which was perceived to be work) on the Sabbath. And why was he carrying his mat? Because Jesus told him to! And, when he runs into Jesus a bit later in the day, Jesus tells him to 'sin no more.' Now, none of that seems to come anywhere close to that notion of Lazarus needing to give up heavenly glory for his earthly resurrection, but it points right back into that notion that there's always a catch. Jesus tells this man to do something that everyone knows is going to get him into hot water with the leaders of his

community. Jesus tells this man to make a fundamental change in his life in the wake of the healing he's known. And we see it all the time in the Gospels.

- Jesus tells that woman being stoned for adultery that she has been forgiven, but that she must sin no more.
- Jesus tells that rich young man that he must sell everything he has to follow Jesus.
- Jesus tells those first disciples that they must drop their nets – and the very lives those nets represent – and become ‘fishers of people.’

We could name dozens of these moments from the Gospel narrative, but there is an inescapable reality to the fact that the healing, forgiveness, and compassion of Jesus, breathed into the lives of those in need, most often comes with a catch – some sort of expectation for shift – a change – a redirection in life that means leaving our comforts, our pleasures, and/or our worldly inclinations behind. All of that wondrous good news of the grace and love of God made known to us in Jesus comes with a catch as to how we could and/or should respond with our lives.

Was Jesus doing Lazarus a favor when he raised him from the dead? I'm not sure on that one, and I'll leave it for you to chew on. But, why did Jesus ask that man if he wanted to be healed? Because, while not as extreme as Lazarus, there's always a catch. There's always something. There's always some expectation of an impact on and/or a shift in our lives – some letting go of that which has been – that could and should emerge from the healing we receive. When Jesus asked that man if he wanted to be healed, there was an underlying question of whether or not that man was ready to embrace the life's shift that came with that healing.

So, today, I want to encourage you to imagine yourself in that position. Consider the brokenness, the hurt, the falling short in your life that cries out for that grace-filled healing of God shown to us in Jesus. It seems so obvious that we would long to be healed from such things. In so many ways, however, we face the very same question. When we consider the life's shift that could and should emerge from such grace... Are we ready? Are we willing? Do we want to be healed? It is, perhaps, a more profound question than we might have first imagined.