

In Search of Healing  
May 5, 2012  
John 5:1-9

*After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. 3In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. 5One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6When 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?” 7The 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.” 8Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” 9At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath.*

I have been busy going through every drawer and every box and every closet trying to decide what to keep and what to discard. I have a garage sale pile, a Goodwill pile, a ½ Price Books pile, a give to friends pile, and a move pile. I am rediscovering items tucked carefully away that I haven't seen since. One of the items I found yesterday was something my mother had ordered for herself and each of her four children almost twenty years ago. It's called the “sTimulator,” (don't worry, not what you are thinking ☺). This revolutionary product was designed to cure what ails you, from severe back pain to your run of the mill aches and pains.

If I could get \_\_\_\_\_ up here I will demonstrate its curative power. The beauty of this product is that you do not have to plug it in or replace batteries, no this baby works on pure static electricity. You just point and click...and click...and click... Imagine giving four grown children shocking devices for Christmas! I don't know if the thing ever cured anything but it sure was good for a laugh.

Finding the “little shocker” made me think about all the crazy things people buy and try to find a cure for an affliction. The Glore Psychiatric Museum in St. Joseph, Missouri shows the equipment and treatments given to people with mental illness in the late 1800's. There is the “Bath of Surprises” and this wheel that looks like a wood gerbil wheel that made a person stay in continuous motion. The advent of electricity created a whole new set of horrifying treatments, and yet, desperate for healing, people submitted.

Infomercials for healing products seem to assume that people with chronic health problems don't sleep and do nothing but watch television from midnight to six a.m. It is a shopping bonanza of wacky cures, everything from magnets to mangosteen berries promise to restore your health. And people buy these products because they are desperate. They either cannot afford medical intervention or have already tried everything there is to try.

In Greek culture, the culture adopted by the Romans and the culture in which Jesus lived during his ministry; in this culture they had these things called Asclepieions. An Asclepieion is a healing temple of the god Asclepius. They functioned a bit like hospitals in that people would check in, have their dreams interpreted, take baths, use the gymnasium, and tip toe around snakes. Evidently, Asclepius thought snakes were sacred. There is even evidence that crude surgeries were performed using an opium anesthesia.

The pool of Bethesda was located at an Asclepieion. This fact was not uncovered until 1964 when an archeological dig revealed the five-sided pool and the porticoes just as the gospel writer described. The story associated with this particular pool said that when an angel troubled the waters the first person in the water would be healed. Only the King James Version contains verse four:

*For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.*

Evidently some of the oldest manuscripts don't have this verse so more modern translations leave it out. It could have been added to help the reader understand.

A good friend of mine went to seminary in New York City and he told me about the iconic fountain in central park with an angel statue named, "Angel of the Waters." The statue was commissioned in the 1800's when an aquifer bringing clean water into the city was opened. The city had been suffering under a cholera epidemic and the clean water brought relief and healing. This particular angel has been in numerous movies – often as a symbol of healing power. Anyway...

The name "Bethesda" or "Bethzatha" means in both Hebrew and Aramaic, "house of grace" AND "house of disgrace." The double meaning makes sense if you think about it. People went there for healing, hence grace. Yet the gathering in one place of so many sick and suffering people was a disgrace.

Our story begins that a certain paralyzed man was lying beside the pool. He had been there every day for thirty eight years, waiting for the angel and his chance to be first into the water. But those more able bodied always made it to the water first. With all of his faith and hope in this one cure, he just laid there wasting away for thirty eight years.

According to the story, Jesus is in Jerusalem for a festival and it is the Sabbath. It would be interesting to know why Jesus went to the Asclepieion. Did he go there to prove he was more powerful than magic water or a Greek god? And why this man? Did he know he'd been there all those years? All we know for sure is that Jesus asked him the most ridiculous question imaginable, "Do you want to be well?"

The man can only respond with excuses as to why he is still lame. "Do you want to be well?"

What is Jesus asking here? Is being made "well" something different from the physical healing of his legs? If yes, it might explain why Jesus asks such a silly question?

Sometimes it is helpful to look at a particular word and dig a little deeper into its meaning. I turn to scholars and their expertise for this kind of word study. Anyway, one scholar helps us to understand Jesus' question by asking it this way, "Are you willing to be generated whole?" The word translated "be generated" means "to begin to be" or "to come into existence."<sup>1</sup> I understand it this way, "Are you ready to become a whole new person?" or do you just want to be a healed sick guy?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://skipmoen.com/tag/john-56/>

The guy never does say he wants to be well. Jesus just tells him to take up his mat and walk, which he does. So he is walking along with his mat and the first thing that happens is that he gets in trouble for carrying his mat on the Sabbath. And that starts the whole drama with other Jews who wanted to know who was doing the healing on the Sabbath. Evidently, Jesus didn't leave a business card, because this man did know who healed him. But they bullied him into finding out and reporting back to them so they could yell at Jesus for healing on the Sabbath.

This story is a candy store for preachers! There is so much to choose from! But what I keep hearing is Jesus' question, "Do you want to be well?" While people are looking for cures, Jesus is able to give us something even better – a whole new life. So why are we spending all our time watching Dr. Oz and the Doctors when Jesus can give us so much more!

I wish it wasn't all so cryptic...Jesus wants to make us "well" and give us "abundant life" and supply us with "living water." If we believe, we'll have "eternal life" right now! What does any of it mean?

- Does it mean all your aches and pains go away?
- Does it mean your cancer is cured?
- Does it mean doctors will find that miracle cure for your rare condition?
- Does it mean you won't have belly aches, hang nails, and appendicitis?

Probably not.....

- Does it mean God is with you?
- Does it mean your life is more than your problems and excuses?
- Does it help you to appreciate that not everything is about you?
- Does it mean your life could be richer, fuller, deeper, and have some meaning, with or without illness?

Yes – Yes – Yes

Do you want to be well? We can wait for magic to happen. We can try every cure. But to be well, we need Jesus and the life he offers. Believe it or not, some people don't want it.

Bethesda – it can be a place of grace or disgrace...we get to decide. Amen.