

A Bible Study

Do you want to be healed? (In Defense of Healers)

The biblical story of the pool at Bethesda as written in the Gospel of John Chapter 5:2-16 can be observed from more than one vantage point. One view of the events in the passage is seen from the perspective of the paralyzed man, his lived experience.

A man who was paralyzed for 38 years was lying on his mat at the pool of Bethesda seeking a miracle, hoping against hope. He wanted to walk again so he had people to take him to the healing pool of ritual cleansing. They left him there so he could get into the water when an angel troubled the water. He had to be the first one into the pool if he was to be made whole. He hoped to be healed but he had little to no chance because he could not walk. If he crawled fast enough and fell into the water, he could be healed. The problem was that there were so many sick and infirmed at the pool that the likelihood of his being first was slim to none. He was a person of hope who remained hopeless much of his life. He knew this, and yet he came day after day looking for a miracle of healing.

Then one day he met Jesus. When asked if he wanted to be healed, he immediately rehearsed his lived reality. While he had someone to bring him to the pool daily, he had no one to get him into the water before anyone else got in. Jesus told him to stand up, to pick up his bed, and walk. By faith he did so and was healed instantly. As he was walking toward the religious leaders, they saw him, and they demanded to know why he was breaking the rules and carrying his mat on the Sabbath. He told him that the miracle worker told him to carry the mat and he followed that person's command. The man who was healed after 38 years became a victim of his own good fortune. He got healed on the wrong day of the week and he was in danger of his life at the hands of the religious establishment.

A second vantage point is that of the religious rulers. They were furious with the man that was healed for breaking their rules. The healer was in mortal danger for breaking the Sabbath and causing the man he cured to break the Sabbath. Mind you well that the Sabbath was a symbol of relationship between a people and their Creator God. The Sabbath began at the time of creation as a day of rest. It was a time to be in communion with God the Creator. It was good to rest and

spend time in celebration of life and the giver of life. It became a ritual that shifted to religiosity and then became religious tyranny. What was meant to be a sign of loving relationship became a death sentence to the one who broke the rules. In the mind of the religious elite it was their responsibility to root out this evil and to set things in order.

When the man who was healed told the religious leaders that it was Jesus who healed him and that he told him to break the Sabbath and carry his mat, the leaders plotted to kill Jesus. Jesus' declared self-perception and the breaking of the rule of the Sabbath deserved nothing less than the punishment of death, in the minds of religious establishment. The fact that the man was healed was not material. His healing was of little consequence. The person who was healed and the healer broke the rules and they were law enforcement protecting the status quo.

A third perspective to consider is that of Jesus. The words of Jesus to the disciples of John the Baptist who wanted to know if he was the promised leader demonstrates his self-perception. Jesus said to them, "go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard—the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor." At the center of the call of Christ, his anointing, is wholeness and healing for God's creation. Luke 7: 19 & 20; Luke 4:14-21; Isaiah 61:1ff.

A fourth vantage point might be that of the Jewish community of that day. They were a proud people of rich heritage who at this point in history were under Roman rule. They were not the first-class citizens of Rome with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto. Rather they were the subjects of Roman domination. Their historic law was subservient to Roman law. The religious hierarchy of the Jewish community was permitted a level of governance providing that it would keep the Jewish nation under the control of Rome. If the Jewish religious leaders kept the masses under control, they would be given special privileges and could keep high status among their own people. Now there was considerable unrest in the Jewish community in that day. There were periodic uprisings against Roman rule. The desire for freedom from the oppressor was its own kind of hope against hopelessness. A disempowered people longed for a Messiah to set them free from Roman rule. The religious hierarchy had sway over

the faith tradition and in Jesus' perspective some took full advantage of the power that was theirs and the house of faith became a den of thieves. The people paid taxes to Rome and tribute to the temple. The Jews paid out over 50% of their income between the two institutions.

Allegiance to the religious elite was not a fixed reality. The zeal for freedom led many to ignore the faith as they sought political power through brute force. No doubt this was viewed as threat to the religious establishment who were charged to keep them under control. What is more, the power of the Roman army crushed the freedom fighters and they eventually sacked the city of Jerusalem itself.

The vantage point of the Jewish community members of that day was a mixed bag of faith and fear, freedom and domination, joy and sorrow, and silent desperation. What is of note is that we see no uprising by the masses for the healing leader Jesus. When and where that movement began it was crushed by religious leaders. In fact, Jesus' crucifixion would be tolerated at best by Rome to appease the religious establishment.

The final lens we will lay upon this biblical record is that of the sick. The multitudes gathered at the pool seeking healing were largely abandoned by society. Whatever the healing arts of that day offered to the Roman citizen was not at the disposal of the Jews. In this passage they were brought to the pool to await a miracle. In this instance they were left to compete against one another, to jump, crawl, or fall into the healing waters.

Each day they were brought to the place of Mikvah and taken home at the end of the day if they had care givers. Neglect and abandonment were far too often the lot of the sick. It was they whom Jesus visited and often healed. His acts of kindness and miraculous healing power was a threat to the powers that be. The unspoken rule of the day may have been, keep your power at all costs, stifle uprisings among the masses, abandon the sick, and shut down the healers.

I must state here that my remarks are not intended to be statements of antisemitism. I am reflecting on the biblical record of my faith that is Judeo-Christian. Now I can move to the discussion of the healers and the sick in our society as best I understand it. My lived experience of the current pandemic and what is happening to the masses is my focus.

Today, nearly 80,000 people have died in our country and the projections are for tens of thousands more to fall victim to COVID-19. We all live in fear, realized, or sublimated. Our healers are left to risk their lives in the service of the humanity. Our nation is not able or willing to provide them adequate personal protective equipment without political pressure. The instruments of healing are provided in a sporadic mismanaged and a haphazard pattern driven by political machinations. Our healers have prescribed mitigation, testing, tracing, and quarantine. These instructions are not followed to completion. It is not clear that we want to be healed. We are reopening society in the face of a second wave of pestilence. The Center for Disease Control has been tangled in bureaucracy, so much so that we the public do not know the full impact of the pandemic or how best to protect ourselves. People are being forced back to work in settings that do not adequately protect them. Healthcare is being denied to many and is under the active threat of removal for others, now, during a public health crisis.

The word of Jesus to the paralyzed man is a good word to us today. Do you want to be healed? So many among us are just like the paralyzed man that was sitting at the pool. We are hoping against hope that the full capacity of the nation will be realized for the health of the people. We know that a major change must take place in order to bring the levels of testing, tracing, and quarantine so that we experience a vicious second wave of pestilence.

Stop your sinning Jesus challenges. Stop falling short of your capacity for empathy. Is the command to stop missing the mark of a higher calling a good word for us today? Questions for reflection:

How hopeless must it feel to finally be among those who are sick enough to be admitted into the hospital if you have adequate health insurance that is. Is that the best we can provide? Are we falling short as a nation? What is your lived experience in the course of this pandemic?

How helpless is the feeling of not being able to provide food for the family for the newly poor? How do we address the needs all who will remain destitute for a significant period of time? Is doing nothing to help them a sin?

Where is the religious establishment today? Are people of faith engaged in helping the healers, affirming the leading epidemiologist, assisting the Center for

Disease Control to protect our lives? Are we monitoring and joining in the mandated actions of mitigation, testing, tracing which protect life?

Is our theology so wrapped in blind allegiance to political ideology that we live in denial of the pandemic, ignore protective measures, or live out the paralysis hope against hopelessness?

If we don't stop our "sinning," might our indifference to the lives of the most vulnerable in society allow the virus to fester, grow, and ravage life around the world? Are we falling short of the call of Christ on our lives?

We are running out of time to implement the strict measures for a safe return to work. Do we really want the best for one another? That is the question.

Wellness, the health of human life, is at the center of spirituality, the religious experience, and the gift of prosperity. Health is not in competition with political power or economic recovery. Christ's biblical question remains relevant even this day. Do you want to be healed?

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