

Sermon: Do You Want to be Made Well?

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, May 25, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Everyone is sick. Every person on earth has something that afflicts them, whether illness, hardship, shame, dysfunction. It may be physical, it may be psychological, or even spiritual. Some are pretty obvious, but others, and that include most people, their sickness are hardly observable. Not all afflictions are of the same scale, and many of us have developed a sort of coping mechanism to mask our illness. But one thing you can count on: everyone has something. Everyone one is sick one way or another. Just walk down Bank Street and tell me who is not sick.

Why then doesn't God simply heal us all? It is the sort of question that I get asked from time to time, be it from a young person going through confirmation, an infirm person hoping to be healed, or a grieving relative over a loved one lost. Why doesn't God heal all?

It is a question that I fumble to answer—sometimes alluding to the fallenness of humanity, sometimes distracting it with the doctrine of free will, and sometimes, especially when I am really stuck, I resort to 'the mystery of God'. So if you ever hear me say that, you know I've run out of useful things to say, that I am at my wits-end.

Why doesn't God heal us all? It is an aged old theological question of theodicy—why does an all powerful, and all loving God allow suffering to exist at all? And adding insult to injury, the immense suffering of humanity we see are not equally shared—some are fairing so much worse; and others are actually being healed!

The Gospel reading in John 5 describes precisely such a scene. A large crowd of sick people, many ill, blind, lame and paralyzed, gathering by a pool with five porticoes, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, or house of mercy. It is an ironic name because mercy is not how I could characterize what actually transpired there.

It was rumoured, and this we read in verse 4 of the chapter, a verse that most English translations now omit due to textual inconsistency, but still preserved in the King James Version, *"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.”

We as readers don't fully understand how such a rumour came about, nor do we fully understand the mechanism of such a healing. But can you picture the madness of this particular triage? Not by first-come-first-served basis, nor by severity of the illness; not by wealth nor by need. It is triaged by whosoever first jumps into the stirred pool. Can you picture the chaos of this crowd of invalids, each with their elbows up, eyes focus on the pool, shoving and pushing, grabbing and tacking one another, in a mad dash to be the first into the pool? That's not mercy, that is, and I am calling a spade a spade, God playing a cruel joke on humanity.

Now, scholars have suggested, base on archaeological dig of the pool, which was unearthed in the 19th century, that Hellenistic influence may have played a larger role in this healing myth, and that the site is sacred to Fortuna, the Roman goddess of fortune, or to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.

The location of this unearthed pool outside of the old city wall, may have made its presence less objectionable to the Jewish religious authorities in the first century. In essence, what this suggests is a case of syncretism whereby Judaism coopted a certain aspect of religious myth of another religion, in order to appease its own adherents, in the face of overwhelming sickness and suffering. The faint hope that such a pool may provide, is better than no hope at all.

To such a misery of a gathering of miserable masses, Jesus waded in. On a Sabbath day of all days, during a festival of the Jews, instead of joining the festivity in the Holy city, Jesus went down to Bethzatha, to that particular long-term care facility, and came face to face with a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years, who had been by the side of the pool for a very long time.

The last time I was at an emergency room was due to Daisy's car accident. She was rear-ended at an intersection, by another car that couldn't come to a complete stop due to icy road condition. An ambulance came and took her to the nearby Civic Hospital where the emergency room was already jammed packed, early in the morning. Her injury did not appear to be severe, just a whiplash with minor discomfort in her neck. So she was triaged to the yellow zone where the anticipated wait time would've been 9 hours. Daisy and I looked at each other, and made a judgement call to simply go home.

I think the longest that I've ever waited in an emergency room was about 6 hours, and that was already an intolerable experience. I couldn't picture what 9 hours of wait would be, so we simply gave up.

This is just an opinion of mine: Canadian like to tell ourselves that we have access to universal healthcare. We don't, not really. What we have access to is the universal wait-care—9-hr wait in an emergency room, 6-month wait to see a specialist, 3-year wait to find a family doctor, not to mention waiting for a whole range of life-saving operations.

Imagine being sick for 38 years! 38 years! That just two years short of Israel's experience of wandering in the wilderness, waiting to enter into the Promised Land. Except for this man, his promise was in plain view, the pool of water right in front of him, but no one to help him on the account that everyone else was trying to get ahead of him.

And Jesus came to him with this puzzling question: **“Do you want to be made well?”** I can just imagine the man thinking to himself, with a bit a righteous indignation: What kind of question is that? Do you think I am lying here all these years simply because I enjoy the view? Of course I want to be made well!

But instead, the man meekly shared his sad, hard reality of what his life has become, “Sir, I have no one,” he says. No one to help him into the pool, no one to care of his long illness, no one to guide him, to encourage him, to stand along side of him. No one, it would seem, to even notice him, or see him. That is until Jesus sees the man, and says to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.”

Unlike other healing stories, the faith of the man was a non-factor. He did not seek out Jesus, he did not grasp a corner of his robe, he didn't know who Jesus is, in fact, he did not even ask for a healing. Yet when Jesus tells him, rather commands him to “stand up, take your mat and walk”, at once he was made well, and took up his mat and began to walk.

This is a miracle story that defies logic, pattern, or justice. For whatsoever reason, this man, this one man in a pool of brokenness, of human suffering, somehow he was made well, him alone. This is a healing story that raises more questions than answers.

I admit that I really don't like this story. I much prefer the miracle of five loaves and two fishes where all are fed; I much wish for the kind of healing that everyone single person waiting by that pool walks away healed and made whole. Why him? Why only him? This must be a mystery of God, where I've just run out of useful things to say, as I am at my wit-end.

I don't have an answer for you today, but will simply offer a few observations. First, without Jesus, this man hasn't got a chance. He was at the back of a long merciless line, and he's got no one to help him to jump the queue. Without Jesus, he would still be stuck there, right by the pool, so close to the promise, but so far from being made well.

It occurs to me this man doesn't necessarily need a supernatural miracle, he needs a different system, a better system of portioning care, a better managed queue, a better model of justice and mercy. Most of all, he needed a friend to advocate on his behalf. Perhaps there is a lesson for the Church, to look for those at the back of a line, to whom we should allocate our limited resources, our limited care.

Another observation that I would note is the timing of the healing—it took place on the Sabbath, a day of what should've been rest. In the second half of this story, in verse 10-18, upon learning of such miraculous healing, the Jewish religious authorities were incensed for they had deemed that all healing is work, and work is not permitted during the Sabbath.

Now, if I was a lawyer defending the Lord, I would've been jumping up and down, pointing out: "Your honour, Jesus only spoke words. He simply said to the man, "Stand up, take your mat and walk!" Speaking words is not considered as work, is it?"

However, Jesus took a different track. He really seems to relish in the role of a disruptor as he responded to his persecutors, in verse 17, "My father is still working, and I also am working."

To Jesus, the work, the mission by which he is sent by God to do, is to usher in the Kingdom of God, and this work is incomplete. So Jesus marches on. He disrupts what is unfair, what is unjust. He gathers whosoever is willing. He heals along the way, until that day, the day of the Lord, when heavenly vision, as described in Revelation 22, the final chapter of the Bible, where the water of life flows from the throne of God, nourishing the tree of life on both side for the healing of nations.

Until that vision becomes an earthly reality. Amen. Amen.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**