

August 21, 2022

That's who I am ... or am I?

John 5:1-15

In my UBC days, I signed up for English 235: The Bible as Literature. I thought it would be a great course for me, as a relatively new-to-faith Christian. The professor knew the Bible inside out and backwards. She had a phenomenal knowledge of the text. But she made it clear she didn't believe a word of it. It was just literature, like Homer's Iliad or Shakespeare's Hamlet. She knew all **about** God, Jesus, and the Spirit. But she didn't **know** God, Jesus, or the Spirit at all. It was deadly. I lasted a week and transferred out.

The Pool of Bethesda, just north of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, was a well-known place of healing in Jesus' day. Originally part of Jerusalem's water supply, the Romans had converted it into a shrine to their god, Asclepius, the god of healing. Once in a while, the water in the pool, apparently, would bubble up. When that happened, according to superstition, the first person into the water would be healed.

Apparently, many Jewish invalids bought into this pagan myth. John describes that crowds of sick people – blind, lame, and paralyzed – lay around the pool, waiting for the water. The Jewish invalids, of course, would attribute any healing to an angel of God.

It was a bit like my UBC English class where the prof knew about God but didn't know God. At Bethesda, people know about God but don't know God either. They buy into a pagan myth. They mark time. But they don't really know the love, the power, or the touch of God.

Jesus is in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival. He visits the Pool. One man has been lying there for 38 years. Usually when Jesus comes on the scene, people approach Him or call out to Him. Not this time. It is clear, as we read on, he has no idea who Jesus is (5:13). On this occasion, Jesus is the one who initiates conversation. We're not sure this fellow even wanted to speak with Jesus. It doesn't matter. Jesus wants to speak to him.

Sometimes in our brokenness, when the last person we are thinking about is God, He, Himself, comes to us. God meets us where we are, as we are. He may not wait for an invitation. We may not even recognize Him. We may not want to speak with Him. Regardless, Jesus may want to speak to us.

Imagine waiting for 38 long years, and someone asks, "*Would you like to get well?*" (5:6). That would get your attention. You would be ecstatic. You would shout, "*Yes!*" You would want to know who this person is asking you such a thing and whether he could deliver on his invitation. Wouldn't you?

Jesus asks a simple "yes" or "no" question. But the man isn't really listening. Instead, he tells a sad story of disappointment and heartbreak, blaming the world at large for all his woes. The man does NOT ask Jesus to heal him. It almost seems like he is perfectly happy to eke out his days laying by the pool ... It's the only world he knows. He's scraping by.

To be fair, this fellow has had 38 years to become discouraged. Yet another festival, another big celebration. But it makes no difference. Thirty-eight years of the same old same old. Thirty-eight years of just being "that guy" lying by the pool.

Besides his obvious physical issues, **he is crippled by loneliness**. No one is there to help him into the pool. No one cares about him. Then, when he is healed, no one is excited. Religious people notice him, only because they're appalled he's carrying his sleeping mat on the Sabbath. Totally missing the miracle, the authorities simply see him as a problem.

He is also crippled by a small view of God. The superstition was the first one – and only the first one – into the pool when the waters moved would be healed. This invalid could never make it. All of this was not HIS fault, of course. *"I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me"* (5:7). **If only** he could be the first one in the pool, everything would be wonderful.

Does that square with your understanding of God? Of Jesus? Of the Spirit? Does God only heal IF we get the formula just right? If we pray a prayer just right? If we have all our doctrines just right? If we do things just right? If we give to the right online/TV ministry? **If only** we could find the magic key that would unlock the door of God's blessing ...

Sometimes we live in an **"if-only"** world. If only I felt better ... if only I could get out of debt ... if only I could get a new job ... if only I could change my spouse/kids/parents/friends ... if only I won the lottery ... if only we could get into the pool of Bethesda. It always makes us feel better to blame someone else. We're hard done by. Someone else gets there first.

Do we hear the voice of God speaking to us right here, right now, right to us, saying, *"Would you like to get well?" Do you want new life, now?*

The man never does answer Jesus' question about whether he wants to be healed. Jesus simply interrupts the man's whining and blaming with a blunt command, *"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk"* (5:8). The man is so shocked, he actually does it.

The word Jesus uses – *"get up"* – is the same word uses when He speaks to the Jewish authorities shortly afterwards: *"the Father gives life to those he **raises up** from the dead"* (John 5:21). It's the same word New Testament authors use over and over to describe Jesus' resurrection – He *"rose up"* from the grave – and how we are *"raised up"* to new life with Jesus NOW, and forever, when we are resurrected after death.

Jesus offers this man nothing less than a resurrection. He can be healed – physically, socially, emotionally, spiritually. His whole life can be reborn. Wonderful? Right?

Or not. Resurrection can be a problem. A big problem.

For 38 years, WHO this man is is the guy who lays by the Pool of Bethesda. You know, the guy who has no one to help him in? The guy whose only skill is begging? And complaining?

And blaming? Who may not have the best life, but is getting by? THAT guy?

With healing – new life – resurrection – what happens now? What's he going to do? He has no trade. No education. No work experience. No other home. No ... nothing. Jesus can give him a new beginning, a new life, a resurrection – but how is that going to work? He will find himself launched on what **we** know will be a much more satisfying and fulfilling way of life than lying on a mat by a pool. He will be able to go places. Meet people. See things. Have a better quality of life. But it's also a much harder way of life. Begging isn't an option anymore. He's going to have to get a job. Find a home. Make new friends. Yikes.

Remember, he does NOT ask for this. I wonder how he feels? He had an identity – albeit as an invalid and a beggar. A place – albeit a mat on the sidewalk. The future is ... scary. Would he rather just stay in the past? Maybe he doesn't really WANT to change?

I can identify with this fellow at times. When Jesus walks into your life, speaks to you, and tells you to "rise up" to something new – or just changes something in your life whether you want it or not – it can be scary.

When I first came to faith in Jesus in high school, it was a resurrection. I found new hope, meaning, purpose, and perspective in Jesus. But resurrection was a problem. Jesus challenged me about my priorities and values. I wanted to "fit in" with the cool crowd. Jesus called me to befriend some of the "not-so-cool" kids. That cost me my standing with some of the cool kids. I found myself out of the "in" group. That hurt. But I also made some amazing friends I never would have got to know otherwise. And, I think, they really need our friendship, too. Following Jesus may launch us into a new life; it will be a good life.

In university, I was intending to go into law or academia, make a (very) good living, have a big house, a fancy car, and exotic vacations. Jesus called me to be a pastor. I did NOT want to do that. It cost me some of my dreams and a few friends. That hurt. This resurrection and new life following Jesus can be a problem. It is scary. But it has been an amazing journey, finding even greater fulfillment in things other than the big house, fancy car and exotic vacations. Following Jesus may launch us into a new life; it will be a good life.

Life is not all a bed of roses, of course. Over the years I come back to this story again and again. As I've shared several times, I live with chronic pain in the left side of my face. Thanks to an infection almost 30 years ago, a nerve is permanently damaged, sending constant pain signals to my brain. When it's really bad, I'm tempted to think of myself as "that guy in chronic pain." If I make that my primary identity, I can excuse moaning and complaining. I can excuse NOT listening to God's call to be about the business of being a pastor. But that isn't who I am. Jesus helps me as I pray and ask for His strength, day by day, to carry on. And Jesus has provided treatment through the blessing of awesome health care. Over the years – thanks to the help of many wonderful doctors and physiotherapists – we have found a medication and an exercise routine that helps manage the pain.

I believe Jesus still loves me, cares for me, and has a purpose for my life. First and foremost, I am NOT "that guy in chronic pain." The pain is always there. It's real. There are things I

cannot do – like allow myself to get really stressed or really tired (or the pain skyrockets). First and foremost, I – like you – am a beloved child of God. God loves me. God is with me. And God can get me through. Jesus can still work in and through my life to serve His Kingdom. I can move forward and have a full, meaningful, productive life. You are a beloved child of God. God loves you. God is with you. And God can get you through.

As I've also shared a couple of times, I have gone through times when I've struggled with my mental health. Mental health challenges are real. They are not just "in your head," a sign of weakness, or something that can just be prayed away. They are real, medical issues that need real treatment. At my worst, I'm tempted to think of myself as "that guy with depression." If I make that my primary identity, I can moan and complain. I can choose to allow that to define who I am and limit who I become. Or I can choose to believe Jesus can help me, through the dark times. First and foremost, I – like you – am a beloved child of God. God loves me. God is with me. And God can get me through. As I pray and ask for Jesus' help, He get me through the dark valleys, moment by moment. Thanks to God's presence, power, and His gift of amazing family, and friends, I keep moving forward.

Mental health struggles are very, very real. Many people have much, much more serious challenges than I do. The church needs to be a safe place where we can talk about these things openly, honestly, and without judgment. Always know that you are a beloved child of God. God loves you. God is with you. And God can get you through.

I wish we knew more of what happens next in this man's life. All we know is that Jesus finds him again, calls the man to follow after God's way (5:14), and then the man went and told the Jewish leaders it was Jesus who had healed him (5:15). That's all we know.

Jesus asks each of us, "*Would you like to get well?*" (5:6). In our case, it may not be an instantaneous physical or emotional healing (I still live in constant physical pain and wrestle with my mental health). But Jesus – and good friends, family, and professionals – can give us new hope, new joy, new peace, new love – a new life, resurrection life. Do we really want that? We SAY we want the healing. Or do we? Are we actually content defining ourselves, first and foremost, by our problems from the past? Are we willing to really listen to what Jesus might be saying to us?

What if He's saying, "*Get up! Get on with it?*" Are we willing to risk the change He may make in our lives?

Do you really know God, or just know about God? Do we know God as a BIG God who can do all things, even raise the dead to new life? Even get us through our biggest challenges.

Do I know who I really am? That I am a beloved child of God. God loves me. God is with me. God can get me through. That IS who I am. How can I be THAT person?