

**“Do You Want to Be Made Well?”**  
**John 5:1-18; Isaiah 6:1-8**

The scene was repeated so often that it became a caricature of the events. For some now difficult to fathom reason, some politicians decided they would tour around the country and hold town meetings on health care. Ostensibly, the idea was to discern how ordinary Americans felt about health care reform. First of all, let me say that if those were average Americans attending those meetings, we are in big trouble.

But invariably, rising to speak at these events would be a man or woman obviously over the age of sixty-five. And they would immediately begin a vehement condemnation of the federal government having anything to do with health care. They would talk about how the government did not possess the ability to run a large program like national health insurance. Numerous times they would disdainfully use the word “socialism.” Government health care was a step, a huge and devastating, step toward socialism. Government run health care was trouncing our American principles. The country should not, they would not, stand for this evil to penetrate our society. Nothing could be worse than government run health care.

And then, like clockwork, after getting all lathered up, they would conclude with these words, “And I do not want you to touch my Medicare.”

I don’t know how to break this to you, but if you are sixty-five or older, you are in government run health care. You may not like it. You may think it is socialism. But Medicare is government run health insurance.

Have you ever noticed that as human beings, our tendency is to get snagged by peripheral issues while ignoring the central ones? I hear people say, “With this or that health care plan, you won’t be able to choose your own doctors.” I don’t know what health care plan you have. But the entire church staff is with the Board of Pensions of the Presbyterian Church, which farms it out to Blue Cross/Blue Shield. They have a little designation called in network and out of network doctors. I can choose all the out of network doctors I want, as long as I am willing to sell my first born child to pay for it. So, the insurance company already chooses my doctors.

Now, I am not making light of health care reform. If you are out of work and lost your health insurance; if you run a small business, like a church, and pay the cost of health insurance for your employees; if you have a pre-existing condition and are trying to get health insurance; if you are a physician and have to get approval for patient’s tests and medications; or if you are like me and had to deal with that lady at the mail order prescription drug plan who said I had to pay \$250 for a medication I have taken for ten years and only paid \$30 at my local pharmacy, but she said the prescription rules are different in Pennsylvania and no I couldn’t mail it back, and that yes I could still get it at my local pharmacy if I was

willing to sell my first born child to pay for it, then you are aware that we do need health care reform.

But we will not accomplish positive reform, whatever style it may take without discussing the core issues.

Is health care a right or a privilege?

What is the cost and who should pay and how?

Should there be a focus on preventive care?

Should people who do not practice good health care habits be penalized?

Now, I could go on, just as could each one of you. We all carry strong feelings about the health care debate. But we will not resolve it unless we ask the right questions.

Now, in our scripture, Jesus attempts to get a man to ask the right questions about his health care. Jesus comes to a Jerusalem pool called Bethzatha. For us, it would look like a large swimming pool covered by five arches or porticoes. In the first century, these pools, usually fed by springs, provided drinking water and bathing opportunities. It was also a place where the sick and disabled gathered. In the first century, there were no hospitals, so the sick or handicapped had to find a place to reside and a public pool was a good venue because of the access to water and people from whom one could beg.

This pool also provided another reason. Verse four is left out of our scripture because it does not appear in the best ancient biblical manuscripts, obviously inserted by later scribes to help us understand what John's first readers would have already known. There was a legend that an angel would periodically stir the waters of the pool and the first person to enter the water after the stirring would be healed.

When Jesus comes to the pool he sees this man who has been sick for thirty-eight years. We are not told what is wrong with him, only that Jesus knew he had been there a long time. And the first words out of Jesus' mouth go right to the heart of the man's health care: "Do you want to be made well?"

Notice that the man doesn't really answer the question. Rather, he defends his present situation: "Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up (or when the angel stirs it); and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

Jesus says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Immediately, the man is made well, takes up his mat and begins to walk.

Well, the religious authorities spy this man breaking the Sabbath law by carrying a mat, his bed. When confronted, the healed man says, "The guy who cured me told me to carry my mat." But when asked who that was, the healed man did not know Jesus' identity.

From there, the man is obviously walking all over Jerusalem testing out his newly working legs and he would naturally head to the Temple, where Jesus finds him. Jesus tells him, "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." The man then tells the religious authorities that it was Jesus who healed him.

Confronting Jesus with his healing on the Sabbath, Jesus tells them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.” And John tells us this is when the religious authorities began to persecute Jesus, seeking to kill him not only for breaking the Sabbath, but for saying that he was equal with God.

A police car pulled up in front of Grandma Bessie’s house, and Grandpa Morris got out. The polite policeman explained that this elderly gentleman said he was lost in the park and couldn’t find his way home. “Oh, Morris,” said Bessie, “You’ve been going to that park for more than thirty years! How could you get lost?” Leaning close to his wife so the policeman couldn’t hear, Morris whispered, “I wasn’t lost. I was just too tired to walk home.”

The religious authorities were angry at Jesus for breaking the Sabbath. But the real reason that drove them to violence was Jesus equating himself with God.

The core element of this story resides in verse six where Jesus’ first words to the sick man are: “Do you want to be made well?” Now, on the surface, this sounds like a goofy question. What sick person doesn’t want to be made well? Yet, being made well will radically change the man’s life.

One could become accustomed to lying by the pool. Jerusalem’s weather is pleasant. Whether by begging, or family, or both, someone else would take care of your clothing and food, your monetary needs. One would not be beset with the stress of commerce or child raising or unemployment. And there would always be something or someone to watch, with whom to talk, with the constant flow of people at the pool. To be made well would create the expectation of getting a job, attending to your own needs, becoming a contributing member of his extended family, scores of responsibilities he did not possess as a sick man. So, Jesus’ question cut right to the heart of not only the man’s health care issue, but his life: “Do you want to be made well?”

This may be the most important question in the entire Bible and it is directed at each and every one of us: “Do you want to be made well?”

Do you want your marriage to work?

Do you want to give up alcohol and drugs?

Do you want to be a generous person?

Do you want to be like Jesus?

All of us like what the faith says in the abstract. “Church is nice. I enjoy the children’s Christmas program. I like Chef Regina’s Wednesday meal, especially at \$6.50 each. I’m glad the church lets my Girl Scout troop meet for free.” Yes, but do you want to live like Jesus? Do you want to be made well?

In the abstract, the sick man undoubtedly wanted to be made well. But Jesus’ question forced him to look beyond the surface deep into his soul and ask himself if he was willing to live as a man who had been made well. Being forgiven, living a moral, godly, righteous life, exhibiting faith and generosity sounds good to every one of us. But being forgiven means I also must forgive. A godly life demands putting away prejudices, my disgust at the poor, trying to

understand the plight of illegal aliens, the sick, the old, the disabled. A life of faith signifies seeking the biblical imperative of giving ten percent of my income to God, telling my son or daughter he will choose church over sports, or the beach, or sleeping in after a Clemson game. “Do you want to be made well?”

In March of this year, Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama died at age seventy-nine. Donald Shriver, former president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, where Koyama taught for sixteen years, paid tribute by recalling the ordeal Koyama and other Japanese Christians went through in Japan during World War II. Shriver said, “Etched into [his] memory were the incredibly courageous words spoken to him at his baptism [in Japan during WWII] by the pastor of [his] congregation: ‘Kosuke, God calls you in Jesus Christ to love all your neighbors, even the Americans.’” Shriver continued, “The ‘even’ would become a theological watchword in the rest of his life.”

There are a lot of “even” people, events, and obstacles in our lives. But the watchword of our lives will be determined by how each one of us answers the question: “Do you want to be made well?”

“It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.”

It is important to understand this challenge by the religious authorities was not a frivolous matter. Exodus 31:14-15 declares that profaning the Sabbath is punishable by death. We know that in the early Maccabean period when the Jews were fighting their enemies, they chose to die rather than do battle on the Sabbath. So, breaking the Sabbath was a serious offense that was viewed as both disobeying God’s law and offending the holiness of God Himself. Of course, as humans are so wont to do, the Jews had attempted to quantify this observance of the Sabbath, and thereby had made God’s law into a myriad of rules and regulations that included the prohibition of carrying one’s bed, or mat, on the Sabbath.

This story illustrates a trap into which human beings so easily fall. We blind ourselves to the important questions by focusing on the peripheral ones. The religious authorities ignore the miraculous healing of a very sick man, while condemning Jesus for breaking a Sabbath law.

We still do this today. Fifty percent of American marriages end in divorce. A new study shows that evangelical Christians now have a higher divorce rate than the general population. Yet, what do American churches want to fight about? Homosexuality. Like that has anything to do with the struggle of the American family. Maybe instead of spending millions of dollars and all our energy fighting about homosexuality, American churches should be asking ourselves how to help people in their marriages.

Or, look at abortion, another hot button issue. But four out of every ten babies born in America are delivered by unwed mothers. Forty percent of our children are born outside of wedlock. So, is the real problem abortion, or forty percent of our children born into homes without fathers, and most at a lower socioeconomic level providing few opportunities?

Now, I'm not making light of the issues of homosexuality and abortion. They are serious questions, but are they really the central ones of family and faith? Every one of us in this sanctuary is either divorced or has someone in our family who is divorced. First-hand, we know the pain, the personal devastation, the incredible family pressures marital discord brings to our loved ones. Isn't the important question: how can we help people in this difficult struggle?

The religious authorities had taken a core issue, reverence for the Sabbath, and erected rules and regulations that concealed its true meaning. I worry that in the Christian Church we have layered the important questions of love, forgiveness, generosity, and hope; that we have turned the Good News into the Somewhat Good News.

Jesus told the religious authorities: "My Father is still working, and I am still working." Are we willing to see and discuss where Jesus is still working, and not worry so much about controlling it?

One summer day, a petite and well-poised ninety-two-year-old woman, who fully dressed herself, put on makeup and fashionably coiffed her hair before 8:00 a.m. each morning, moved into a nursing home. Her husband of seventy years, a beloved pastor in their community, had recently passed away, making the move necessary. After many hours of waiting patiently, she smiled sweetly when told her room was ready. As she maneuvered her walker to the elevator, her escort provided a visual description of her tiny room, including the eyelet sheet that had been hung on her window.

"I love it," she stated, with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old who had just received a new puppy.

"Mrs. Jones, you haven't seen the room, just wait."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it," she replied. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. How the room is arranged has nothing to do with whether or not I will like it...it's how I have arranged my mind. I have already decided to love it!" She went on to share, "Each morning when I wake up, I choose to be positive and work with what I have, not dwell on what I have lost. As long as my eyes open, I'll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I've stored away just for this time in my life."

Our ability to see God working in our lives, and the lives of those around us, will be dictated by whether or not we decide ahead of time that we want to focus on the new day Jesus brings.

"Do You Want to Be Made Well?"

It sounds like so simple a question, yet goes right to the heart of who we are and who we want to be. Make no mistake, how we answer this question will determine the course of our lives. It did for the sick man that day by the pool; it will for you and me.

This morning, are you and I willing to look beyond the nagging peripheral questions that so occupy our time and dominate our lives? Can we see not only the challenge, but the hope Jesus offers every one of us?

This morning, “Do you want to be made well?”

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