



*Advent II - December 9, 2012
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*The God Who Heals:
Who He Wants
John 5: 1-15*

How many were here in worship last week? Didn't it feel like we were on holy ground? We didn't know how many would come forward for anointing and healing prayer, but hundreds came for all kinds of healing! And God worked powerfully, didn't He? There were lots of tears. One young woman clung to me, sobbing, for about a minute. Later someone described it as "Deep Church." I wonder, could we start this morning by asking you to raise your hand if God worked some sort of healing in you last week?

Now here's a harder question. Anyone here this morning who did not get the healing that they were asking God for? This is a puzzle, isn't it? Why does God heal some and not others? How does He decide? And if it's not me, why not me? If you have ever wondered these things, perhaps this morning's story will help. [Read John 5: 1-15]

The only eastern access to the Old City of Jerusalem is St. Stephen's Gate. Just inside is a courtyard, and this is what you will see there: this is the Pool of Bethesda. It is a powerful place to visit because as you read this story, you look down on the site below and see exactly the setting described by John. This pool was believed to have special healing powers. Every once in a while the waters would bubble. Tradition held that this was an angel stirring the water and that if you were the first one into the pool after the bubbling began, you would be healed. How many of you ever ran along the deck and jumped into the water screaming, "First one in the pool!" Well, for the hundreds of people who lay on those porches, it wasn't a game. The "first one in the pool" was the only one who got well, so it was a dog-eat-dog world by Bethesda.

Last week we found Jesus in the village of Cana. This week, Jesus travels 90 miles south to Jerusalem to participate in a festival. Last week we met a royal official who walked 20 miles to track down Jesus and beg him to heal his dying son. This week we read about a second miraculous healing, and it could not be more different than the first.

The center of every Jewish festival was the Temple. If Jesus entered Jerusalem through the eastern gate, all he had to do was turn left to walk into the temple area. But Jesus did not go to the temple first. Instead, he turned right into a place

of brokenness. Most of the people around the pool would have been considered unclean and therefore unqualified to enter the temple. The English word used to describe these people—invalids—describes exactly how they were viewed by the rest of “normal” society. They were the in-valid ones; the non-persons. Jesus always seemed to be drawn to the “in-valid.” And I think He loves churches that are filled with in-valids!

It must have been quite a sight: a huge porch filled with in-valids, all jockeying for a seat near the water. Hundreds of people needing healing and yet, Jesus spots one. This paralyzed man started living by the Pool of Bethesda seven years before Jesus was born! For 38 years he had waited for his healing. This is the guy Jesus spots. This is the one guy Jesus will heal... out of hundreds lying there. This means that Jesus stepped over scores of other sick folks on the way to heal him. They didn't know who he was at the time... just one more person stepping over them. But when they saw what happened—when they saw this one guy get his healing—what went through their minds, do you think?

Maybe the same things that go through the minds of us who raised our hands this morning and said, “I didn't get the healing I hoped for.” Questions like, “Do I deserve to be healed?” or “How does God decide who gets healed?” Let's look at those questions more closely. Do I deserve to be healed? This is a common struggle among those longing to be well; maybe I'm not deserving enough. Maybe I don't have enough faith; maybe that's why God hasn't answered my prayer for healing.

So let me ask this: how deserving was this guy? He was about as undeserving a candidate for healing as you will find in the Bible! To start with, there is his lame answer to Jesus' question: “Do you want get well?” He might have answered, “Duh! I've been sitting here longer than you've been alive. Of course I want to get well.” But that's not what he says, is it? He plays the blame game. “No one will help me. Someone always gets to the water before me. Blah, blah, blah... wha, wha, whaaaa.” He's a whiner... a victim!

Then, when Jesus does heal him, he could not be more ungrateful. He doesn't bother to ask his name; doesn't appear to thank him. And to top that off, after he does get Jesus' name, he goes and rats him out to the Jewish watchdogs. Why would he do that? Did this guy deserve to be healed? Heck no! And as for faith, exactly how much faith did he have that Jesus could heal him? None! Zippo! Zilch!

It is true that faith often played a part in the healings of Jesus... like last week's story. But in this case, the man had no faith, no clue, no gratitude and no loyalty; yet Jesus healed him anyhow. Jesus can use your faith to heal you. But Jesus doesn't have to use your faith to heal you. If you are struggling because you think that your faithlessness or unworthiness hinders God from healing you, look carefully at this story! Maybe God wants to lift a burden of guilt and inadequacy off your shoulders.

Here's another tough question. Why does God heal some and not others? Benny Hinn waves his arms over an audience, and everyone falls down. Why didn't Jesus just wave His arms and heal everyone at once? Why did Jesus heal some and not others? Would you like an answer to that? Okay, ready? I don't know! I don't know how God decides whom to heal and whom to not. But I have a few thoughts.

First, let's start by asking another question: What is the ultimate longing of God regarding his children? Answer: To draw them to himself for eternity. Isn't that right? Christmas is about God bridging the gap between perfect heaven and an imperfect world, saving his children from the effects of that broken world, drawing them into his mission, and ultimately calling them home to himself for eternity. Whatever God does in this world serves that ultimate mission.

Can God use miraculous healings to draw people to himself? Absolutely! Although, if the Bible teaches us anything, it teaches us that miracles get old and their memory fades. We think that if God would just give us one good miracle, that we clinch it for us. It doesn't work that way. I spoke once with a friend who was considering Christ and said, "I just want God to throw me a bone. Just give me one little miracle so that I can have a reason to believe in Him." I said, "Wait a second, the last time we ate lunch, you told me that when you were eight years old, you were hit by a pickup truck going 50 miles an hour, knocked out of your shoes which went through the windshield while you went under the truck, and you lived to tell about it. I would say that qualifies as a little miracle, wouldn't you? How big a bone would you like God to throw you?"

Just ask the Israelites in the wilderness who watched God do one miracle after another, and they still turned their backs upon him. Our appetite for the miraculous is like a chocolate-craving. It tastes great at the time, gives us a sugar high, and leaves us wanting more and more and more. Soon, we are focused more on the miracle than the miracle-doer.

So, yes, God can use healings to draw us to himself. But sometimes God uses non-healing to draw us to himself. I spoke this week with two friends who each have boys in wheelchairs. They both testify how God has used their boys' lives to touch others in powerful ways. Would we choose that for our children or for ourselves? No. But Jesus told all of us that following him would mean offering up our lives to him in whatever way he requires. Paul, who was never healed of his disease, was told this by God: "My strength is made perfect in your weakness." Some of Jesus' prophets speak to us powerfully from wheelchairs with a voice we might otherwise not hear.

One more thought about this. Do you recognize what Jesus' primary purpose was in healing this particular man? It wasn't just because he had compassion on him. Jesus healed this guy to provoke a confrontation with the Jewish leaders that would lead to the cross. Jesus heals him on the Sabbath. He tells him to roll up his

mat and carry it on the Sabbath. And he picks a guy he knows will rat him out to the religious watchdogs, because he needs them to start plotting his death. Remember, Jesus came not just to heal one paralytic, but to save a sin-sick world. That could only happen on the cross. Did Jesus have pity on a man who had been sick for 38 years? Yes. But his primary reason for this healing wasn't healing, it was provocation.

We don't know why God heals some and not others, but this story reminds us that everything God does—those whom he heals and those whom he chooses not to heal at this time, and those whom he will never heal miraculously—works together for His eternal good and the eternal healing of “those who love him and are called according to his purpose.” And yet, this is a story of miraculous healing. Jesus didn't heal everyone, but he did heal this guy after 38 years. For some today, God is still asking, “Do you want to be well.”

Do you want to be healed? This may seem like a stupid question. Actually, it is profound! Many people complain about their illness—physical, spiritual, emotional... but when it comes down to it, they don't really want to get better. They prefer sitting sit in their dirty diapers because it is warm and comfortable. Or they enjoy their victimhood because it offers them an identity and someone or something to blame. Life beyond the pool is scary. If you really want to be healed it may mean telling someone the truth, walking into a counselor's office or changing your behaviors. It will mean hard work that moves beyond your healing prayer.

I spoke with one man last week who listened to the sermon and thought, “I don't need no stinkin' healing.” And then it hit him: “Who are you kidding! Your anger is spilling over into every part of your life.” He decided, Yes, I want to be healed. He received anointing, and he made his first counseling appointment. On the outside, this guy has it all together; he is an up-and-comer. But inside he knew he needed healing, and was finally ready to say “Yes” to Jesus' question. As you think about the reason that you haven't received your healing yet, maybe you need to answer Jesus' question for yourself: “Do you really want to be healed?”

Here's another thought: Our healing is never finished. When Jesus found the man in the temple later, he said something cryptic. “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” Does Jesus mean that his sickness resulted from sin? Is it always the case that illness comes from our sin? No, as we will see in two weeks. But, yes, sometimes our sin leads to sickness! A bitter heart can lead to a broken marriage. Pornography leads to broken sexuality. Abuse of alcohol leads to a broken mind. Abuse of food leads to a bad heart. Abusive parents can hand down generational sin.

Sickness can be a result of unrepentant sin. Always? No! We live in a broken world. But sometimes, yes! And here's what Jesus says: Do not settle for half a healing! Jesus, in his grace, gave this man an incredible gift. For the first time in 38 years, he walked. But when next he sees him, Jesus goes right to the heart.

Stop sinning or you will end up worse than you started. Apparently there was a spiritual origin to his illness and Jesus warns him not to go backwards! To finish the work of healing that Jesus started.

Here's the point. A little healing can be a dangerous thing. You have a powerful experience like last week. You sense God working in you... perhaps an emotional healing or a relational healing. You walk away, "There, that's done. God fixed me." When, in fact, he only started to fix you. Now, back to my friend... yes, God stirred his heart and began to heal his anger. But he knew he had work to do with a counselor to make sure that sin did not re-grip him. Or consider the person who felt God delivered them from addiction. Praise the Lord! But if you are not willing to go to CR and share this journey with others, you may fall back into an addiction worse than the first, because you had a taste of God's healing and threw it away. A little healing can be a dangerous thing. Don't let God's miraculous touch be an excuse for you to avoid the hard work God will use to finish what he has begun. And usually this work occurs within a healing community of fellow believers.

Which brings me to a last observation: as critical as I am of the guy in this story, there is one thing he does right. Did you see where he went after his healing? To the temple! Where he could praise God and join a healthier community to live out his healing.

I am struck by the contrast between the community of Bethesda and the healing community Christ longs for us to be. At the pool, it was dog-eat-dog. Healing at Bethesda was a zero-sum game—if one person got healed, someone else didn't. Get to the water first... if another does, you feel jealous and ripped off! God has only so much power and doles it out as best he can until he runs out, and if someone else gets it and you don't, too bad. It's survival of the fittest of the sickest. If you were part of that community, your job was to grab someone by the robe and pull them back so that you could get to the pool first.

But not this community... not this temple. You know what our job is? To push each other into the pool! To long for and pray for healing for each other and cheer when someone else receives it, because we know that healing is not a zero-sum game. We serve an awesome God with limitless power. Do you know what Bethesda means? "House of Mercy." Don't you want Chapel Hill to be a house of mercy?

So, this morning, let's be Bethesda. Let's push each other into the pool. I'd like you to turn around in a moment and form a little circle of folks. And then do something scary. Share something in your life that needs healing those with 3 or 4 people around you. We don't have time for you to share more than 1 or 2 words. Marriage. Body. Child. Job. Depression. This will take guts, and you must treat what you share as if it were the confessional! Cone of Silence! It doesn't go outside your group. I hope we have the courage to be Bethesda to each other.

Then put your hands on each other's shoulders and pray for each other, and I will close. Let's push each other more deeply into the pool.

Sermon Questions

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. What is something you have been praying for healing for? How long have you wanted healing?
2. Did the man at the pool want to be healed? How did he respond to Jesus' healing?
3. Is it unfair that Jesus only heals one man out of the multitude (v.3)?
4. Why doesn't God heal everyone?