

Choosing to be Whole
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
May 16, 2010
7th Sunday of Easter

Gospel Lesson - John 5:1-9

New International Version

¹ Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

⁷ "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

⁸ Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath,

Sermon

Several years back I had the privilege of officiating at the memorial service for the patriarch of the church I was serving at the time in Spokane. As usual, I met with the family the day prior to the service, and was reminded once again just how brutally honest family members tend to be about the "dearly departed."

Such honesty definitely includes sharing the good things about the person. There is also, however, typically a point when someone says, "Well, are we going to tell the Pastor the rest of the story?"

It seems that families somehow know intuitively that if only the sanitized version of their loved one is shared, the meaning and impact of that individual's life will not be fairly represented.

With this particular family, the break-through moment came when a son-in-law, said: "Well, are we going to talk about Dad's temper?"

Everyone laughed, because they all knew the truth. If we memorialized this man without mentioning his capacity to flare into red-hot anger at a moment's notice, we wouldn't be sharing the total picture.

Now let me be clear, this man's anger didn't make him an ogre -- in fact I was told that it usually came out when he was driving -- with the windows rolled up no less.

But, anyone who dealt with Fred over any length of time also got glimpses -- or maybe even large doses -- of this aspect of this man's temperament.

Although his anger dissipated almost as soon as it came, there was never a doubt

that he had, indeed, been angry to the point that his posture, and even his skin coloring, changed.

Now, which of us can't imagine something like this that will be said about us when we are gone?

Maybe that something won't be about our anger, but it will certainly be about one of our less endearing qualities.

But, back to my time with the family in Spokane.

What caught me even more than the son-in-law's comment, was what his daughter said as she opened up about her dad.

"Dad had his priorities straight. It was his faith first, his family second, and then – and only then – his work."

Wouldn't each of us want to have something like that said about us when we pass?

However, listen to what she said next.

"The truth, however, is that Dad didn't have his priorities straight until his first heart attack. Before that it was work first, family second, and faith third."

At which point I silently asked myself the following question:

- ▶ "Why is it that we need a life-changing circumstance to shake us up sufficiently to get our priorities sorted out?

Shouldn't we have enough sense to do sort things out without having to almost die, without losing our mate, or without first alienating our children? Shouldn't we?

Our text this morning from John's Gospel is about a man who through an "unprovoked act of grace" gets his priorities straight. This was a man who was visited by the earthly Jesus, but I anticipate the Risen Christ also comes to each of us in some guise or other, and his question is the same one, "Do you want to be well?"

We are told that this man had been an invalid for 38 years. How long have you -- how long have I -- been an invalid?

Oh, we may be able to walk;

it is likely that our malady is not be visible except to those who know us most intimately;

but it is also true that many – if not most – of us have something that is keeping us from being the completely whole person God intends us to be.

- ▶ for some it is anger, bitterness, or resentment, that keeps us paralyzed;

- ▶ for some it's an addiction to some substance or other, or to some behavior or other, that is outside the bounds of a healthy lifestyle;
- ▶ for some it is an unwillingness to forgive, or to accept forgiveness;
- ▶ for some it's such a low self-esteem that we can't believe God could love us, much less that those around us if they really knew what we were like.

For each of us, however, God through Christ lovingly asks, "Do you want to be well?" "Do you want to be whole?" "Aren't there better ways to spend your life than the ways you are spending it right now?"

Jesus didn't tend to ask his contemporaries simply whether they were right with God -- that is, whether they were saved in a spiritual sense. Rather he asked if they were, or if they wanted to be, whole in body, mind and spirit.

Jesus' question, "Do you want to be well?" is not really answered by the man, is it?

He gives an answer that's not uncommon when people have gotten used to their maladies. They (or we) give an answer that projects the blame for their/our lack of wellness onto someone else.

"Well, I would be willing to be well, but you see it's so and so's fault that I'm not."

"I'd be well if my wife (or husband) wasn't such a nag."

"I'd be well if my best friend wasn't always dragging me into bad habits."

"I'd be well if I hadn't had such a miserable childhood."

"I'd be well if my father (or mother or both) hadn't been so demanding."

"I'd be well if I could just get a better job."

"I'd be well if I didn't have to spend so much time trying to make ends meet."

You know the routine.

Jesus won't have any of it. "Stand up, take up your mat and walk."

Before he had time to think about what it might mean to have to stand on his own two feet, the man was up and walking.

The next verses, just beyond our current text, indicate that there were those who were upset that the man was walking.

Well, actually, they were upset that whoever had enabled the man to walk had done so on the sabbath. But the fact remains that there will always be those who want to keep us trapped within our illness, our addictions, our dysfunctional behaviors. And this is as true for organizations (including religious congregations) as it is for individuals and families.

The reasons they are upset differ, but one thing is certain, your capacity to be

healed is a slap in the face to their own lack of wholeness.

Stop smoking and see who gets upset -- probably a fellow smoker.

Stop drinking to excess and lose some drinking buddies.

Stop engaging in whatever behaviors have been keeping you trapped, and don't expect to receive as many accolades as you'll receive darts thrown your way.

The story line in John's gospel suggests instantaneous healing. Maybe that's because when Jesus is standing right there we don't feel we have much choice. Or maybe it was because Jesus didn't want the man to have too long to think about whether or not he truly wanted to be well.

My experience as a therapist and as a pastor is that healing is rarely instantaneous. It's a process, and often a lengthy one. However, the decision to move toward wellness can be made in an instant.

From 1983 through 1987 I was in private practice as an individual, marriage and family counselor. During that time I also taught as an adjunct at Gonzaga, Whitworth, and/or Eastern. The focus of most of my courses was wellness and stress management.

I got used to the fact that the graduate students who had me as an instructor often made the decision to seek me out for therapy. What took me time to get used to was that they made that decision while they were in my class for a semester; but they might not actually make an appointment to see me for therapy for a year or more. They'd always be honest about the fact that it took them that long to get up the courage to truly deal with the emotional demons that were keeping them stuck. Sometimes even when they'd started to work with me they'd drop out again for a while until they regained the energy and the courage to continue working toward wholeness.

I've also had to learn that wholeness is rarely a once-and-for all phenomenon. I think there's at least one book in me that's yet to be written, and I know the title: "Becoming Whole -- Again, and Again, and Again."

That book is not simply about the clients or parishioners I've been privileged to work with -- it is definitely also about my life story. I can't tell you how often I've thought that surely I've learned something once and for all, only to find that I apparently need to learn it again, because there I am, back in the clutch of the demons that pull me down.

Pastor," you may be thinking, "aren't you being pretty clinical and therapeutic here?"

Possibly, but so was my Master Teacher, Jesus.

As Morton Kelsey put it in his book, *Healing and Christianity*,

Oddly enough, [Jesus'] thinking was in some respects the most materialistic of any of the important religious leaders, particularly in relation to health. The interest Jesus showed in physical and mental health was greater than that of any other religious system from Confucius through Buddha to Zen and Islam.

Thus well before the onset of the psychological age, Jesus went round his countryside confronting people with their need to be whole. Sometimes he healed ailing bodies. Sometimes he taught and healed shriveled minds. Sometimes he railed against rigid and authoritarian systems.

All of his words and actions pointed to the desired "kingdom of God," but it was obvious that this kingdom cared about the whole person, and not simply how they believed.

So, "Want to be well? Want to be whole?"

That's the question all of us need to consider and answer in the private communication between us and our Lord -- that usually then at some point needs to be translated into action steps toward wholeness.

Blessings on the journey! You'll have lots of company, because we all need to be on it.