

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many ill, blind, lame, and paralyzed people. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The ill man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a Sabbath.

Before we had Royce, our chocolate lab, we had a black English lab named Maddie. I hold many wonderful memories of her. She was a well-behaved, easy-going dog that we adored. We were heart-broken when we had to put her to sleep about 12 years ago because she had cancer. I still miss her.

From the time Maddie was a puppy and throughout her life, she traveled with us almost always when we gathered at family events, including the annual swim party Mom and Dad had for the family at their old house.

Labrador retrievers are swimmers; in fact, labs' feet are somewhat webbed to help make them excellent swimmers. At the first pool party we took her to, we were anxious to see whether Maddie would take to the water. We tried to coax her to join us in the water, but she was very hesitant. Instead, she ran and ran around the pool.

There was a moment when my brother coaxed Maddie to come to the edge of the pool near him. He got hold of her and he threw her in the pool. Maddie panicked, and we did too. We jumped in the pool and pulled her out. After that she would not get close to the pool again. She did not want to go into that pool. We assumed from that time on, we would never get her in water again; and we didn't except for the shallow water in the stream that runs by our cabin. She loved it there.

One time, however, many years later when we were spending vacation at the Outer Banks, we took Maddie to the inlet and threw her tennis ball in the water—water deep enough that it would make it necessary for her to swim to get it, and we waited to see what she would do. You could tell she really wanted to go get it, but she was still afraid. But finally, she did it. She jumped in and swam to her ball, brought it back to us and could hardly wait until we threw it in the water again.

Suddenly, it was hard to get her out of the water. The difference this time from the time at my Mom and Dad's pool was that she chose on her own to get into the water and swim. The fear was gone.

The Bible story that we read for you today takes place by a pool too—a special pool in Jerusalem. This pool was special because the people believed it had healing power. There was an old superstition they believed that occasionally an angel came to stir the waters in the pool, leaving it with healing powers, but only for the first person to get into the pool after the waters were stirred-up. Sick and crippled people came to the pool every day or stayed by the pool for many days with hope that they could be the first to get into the pool after the water began to stir.

Some translations of the Bible do not include this bit of information. In those translations, as in the one that was read for you today—the New Revised Standard Version—you will not find a verse four. Verse three is followed by verse five. It is believed that John did not want to give any credence to this fictitious belief and so he did not include it. So, it is believed that the information about an angel stirring the water was actually added later and included in some translations. That is just an interesting side note for you.

On this particular day, when Jesus came to town for one of the three special festivals held every year, there was a sick man by the pool who had been going to the pool for thirty-eight years. That's a long time. Of course, he was not the only person by the pool wanting to be healed of a disease, wound, or handicap; but for some reason, Jesus chose to talk to and heal this particular man.

A question that arises is why did Jesus choose this particular man out of everyone else who was by the pool? The New International Version of the Bible offers a logical answer in its translation by saying in verse six that "Jesus learned," about the man's condition. Many commentary writers say this is an incorrect translation from the original Greek text. Using this translation, we are led to believe that someone told Jesus about the man's condition.

The correct translation is "Jesus knew," which is the translation you heard this morning, about the man's condition. No one needed to tell Jesus about him. He just knew, just like he knew everything about the Samaritan woman by the well. You remember her, don't you? Jesus told her about events and details of her life that there was no way he would have known—like the fact that she had five husbands and the man she was with when Jesus met. He already knew about this condition.

So, here we have Jesus picking out this man by the pool to ask him if he wants to get well. Unlike what usually happens, this man did not ask Jesus to heal him. In fact, he didn't seem to know who Jesus was.

"Do you want to get well?" Jesus asked the ailing man. It sounds like a simple question, but really it is not. There are layers of things to consider when asked this question. Jesus might as well have asked him if he wanted to change; because, if the man said yes that he wanted to be healed, his life was definitely going to change.

His way of life, going to the pool and begging for money so he could survive, was going to end. He would be expected to find work—a trade to support himself. Things that other people did for him; he was now going to be expected to do for himself. That's a huge change in his way of living after thirty-eight years. Did he want to make that change? Did he really want his life to become different or was he comfortable with it just the way it was?

This concept might trigger something in your own thinking about a very real problem society and organizations deal with today. A common discussion I hear people having is that there are some people who are unfortunately born into or who fall onto hard times, and they do not want to make helpful changes in their lives. People who have become accustomed to "using" the system—government programs, church benevolences, the kindness and generosity of people—and they don't want to find the help they need or a job to support themselves and their families. We see how their abuse of the system makes it even more difficult for those who really need the help.

This is, indeed, a serious and troubling issue. As people called by God to serve those in need, we want to help. However, we sadly admit, we don't always know the difference between who sincerely needs help and who is using the system. I don't have an easy answer for you. I struggle with the challenge as you do.

However, turning our attention from this one specific issue, where choosing to make a change can certainly make a difference, we must acknowledge there are other decisions we make that affect change in our lives. Change can make our lives difficult or uncomfortable—at least for a while—which is maybe why key decisions that would initiate change get put on hold or are avoided all together.

There's the change that happens in one's life when he or she says yes to Jesus and in giving his or her life to him and they become a new person, letting go of their old sinful ways, and walking in newness of life by following Jesus' example. Baptism symbolizes the change that happens to us when we give ourselves to Jesus. It symbolizes the washing away of the old and rising to new life. For some people that requires a huge change. It is a choice. Jesus stands before the lost and asks, "Do you want to get well?"

Praise God for those who say yes to wanting "to get well." There are a whole lot of people—some you may know—who keep making excuses for not letting Jesus into their lives. At the heart of making a decision for Christ may be that they just don't want the changes that a commitment to Jesus would require in their lives.

Here's something else interesting to note in the story. Did you happen to notice that the sick man in the story never really said yes? Instead, he tried to explain to Jesus that he continued to be sick for all of those years because he could not get into the pool fast enough to be the one who would get healed, and he said he had no one to help him. For thirty-eight years, he could not find someone to help him? Or was this simply an excuse for really not wanting to get well?

A farmer asked his neighbor if he might borrow a rope.

"Sorry," said the neighbor. "I'm using my rope to tie up my milk."

"Rope can't tie up milk."

"I know," replied the neighbor, "but when a man doesn't want to do something, one reason is as good as another."

It's easy to get frustrated with these kinds of people. We all know those who answer every suggestion or even every obvious solution requiring change with "but" ... something. It's just too easy to make excuses, including excuses that sound good to get out of doing something. It doesn't seem to even matter sometimes when one knows the outcome of doing something differently will make for something better. Getting past the "buts" that hold people back from making changes in their lives can be a very, very difficult hurdle to overcome.

This leads us into the final point I want to make this morning. Remember that Jesus told the man by the pool to "pick up his mat and walk." Like this man, if we really do need and or want to change something in our lives, then we need to take some action. We need to not only make some decisions but also make some movements toward what is real—toward truth, toward our Savior.

The man that Jesus helped was not going to get well by simply laying aside the pool, nor was he going to get well if he was counting on a myth about the water being a healing pool at certain times. He was healed when he listened to Jesus' command to pick up his mat and walk.

Also, by telling the sick man "to take up his mat," the Lord was telling him something very important, as he tells all who truly want to change— don't turn around and look back; do not let doors open and then go back to the way things were. Many people fail right here. They burn bridges.

Furthermore, according to verse fourteen, which we did not read this morning, when Jesus found this man in the temple later, he said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." A literal translation of the Greek is "don't keep on

sinning. Don't take for granted this healing you've received, live into the change that has begun in your life."

Have you heard about the Australian aborigine who got a new boomerang, and then spent the rest of his life trying to throw away his old one? Besides conjuring up a humorous picture of this man and his dilemma, the constantly returning boomerang image also speaks to a familiar problem. How many of us have spiritual boomerangs which keep returning or intruding on our lives? We fail to terminate bad relationships and thus replay patterns of dependence or self-absorption. We return again to harmful habits, hurting ourselves or ones we love. We rely on old reactions in the face of new circumstances, refusing to grow spiritually or emotionally.

It is easy to get frustrated and angry with ourselves when we get caught in a boomerang cycle with our hurts, habits, wants and the like. We might ask ourselves over and over, "Why? Why can't I change?" Could it be that we really haven't been willing to change? It takes courage and honesty to examine that possibility and answer it truthfully.

Do you have changes you need to make in your life? Are you ready to be changed? Whether it is because of illness, broken relationships, emotional stress and anxiety, questioning your faith, sin and wandering from God, we all have times, even as Christians, when a making decision we are faced with may require change. You can be changed if you truly want to be. Jesus teaches us that for change to happen:

- We Must Decide If We Want To Be Changed?
- We Must Decide To Discontinue Making Excuses.
- We Must Decide Whether We Are Ready To Act. —...not the pool of fantasy and lies—but the pool of our baptism, the pool of God's love, where the old will be washed away and the change in us will rise. Amen.