

Stuck

John 5:1-18

February 11, 2007

He had been sick for thirty-eight years.

That's a long time to be sick! It has been thirty-eight years since 1969, the year Richard Nixon was inaugurated as our 37th president. That was the year of the first moon landing; the year of Woodstock and the Manson family murders; the year of Super Bowl III, the first Super Bowl not won by Green Bay, Joe Namath's Super Bowl; and the year of the My Lai massacre in Viet Nam.

For thirty-eight years, he had been stuck, trapped by disease, unable to walk, deprived of a full and normal life, never getting any better, never getting well.

Jesus found him lying by the pool of Bethzatha. Did he just happen to be there that day? Or did he come to lie by that healing pool every day? Could it be that he been coming to lie by that same pool every day for thirty-eight years?

I can't imagine it! I can't imagine the cruel paradox of the promise of those healing waters with the reality of his unrelenting disease. I can't imagine the cruel paradox of being so close to healing but yet so far, of lying so close to the pool but being unable to get in quickly enough when its waters were stirred.

Do you suppose he tried just once to get in? Or did he try again and again until the skin on his knees and forearms was worn raw by trying? Do you think he still tries? Or do you think he gave up trying, maybe gave up trying years ago, but still comes to the pool because it is the only thing he has left to do?

I can't imagine that cruel paradox of hope and despair, of being reminded every day of what he wants and what he can never have. He lies there by the pool, alone, with no one to help him, alone in his misery, alone in his cocoon of despair, stuck in this paralysis of body and spirit.

So tell me, how long have you been stuck? How long have you been stuck, demoralized by the great gap between who you are and who you wish you were, between desire and reality? How long have you been alone in your misery, trapped in the cocoon of your despair, stuck in an unrelenting paralysis of body and spirit? A few months? A few years? Maybe far more than thirty-eight years?

How long have you been stuck, stuck in the prison of your own low self-esteem, not believing you can be anything more or do anything better, unwilling to risk, unwilling to try, but still feeling the deep pain of what you are not?

How long have you been stuck, stuck in a frozen marriage, cold and rigid, stuck in patterns of relating that help neither of you but that neither of you can do anything to change?

How long have you been stuck, stuck in addiction -- to alcohol or television, to video games or My Space or sports -- stuck in addictions that rob you of life, that rob you of the fullness of life, that fill your time and your mind and your heart with things that matter so little and leave little space and time for things that matter so much?

How long have you been stuck, stuck in the past, hoping for a better future for yourself but afraid to try anything new, hoping for a better future for your church but unwilling to change?

How long have you been stuck, stuck in guilt, despairing over whatever it is you have done or whatever it is you have not done?

How long have you been stuck, stuck in unbelief, coming to church, coming close to these healing waters, but leaving still empty, unfulfilled, unbelieving, void of passion, void of joy?

How long have you been stuck, stuck in grief?

Do you want to get well?

Jesus' question sounds insulting. *What do you mean do I want to get well? What do you think? I'm here lying by the pool, aren't I? Of course I want to get well. Of course I want to feel better about myself. Of course I want a stronger and more genuine faith. Of course I want to be free of my addictions. Of course I want my church to grow.*

Do you want to get well?

Listen to Jesus' question! It isn't an accusation, it's an invitation. *Do you want to get well?* This is the time. This is your chance.

I don't have anyone to put me in the pool. That's not an answer to the question! It's an excuse. He's right. It's true. He has no one to help him, but it's still an excuse. It still misses the point. He has painted himself into a corner. He has imprisoned himself in the closed box of his own disappointments, of his own disabilities. He cannot see anything outside the box!

It can't be fixed. It's too late. It's who I am. Our differences are irreconcilable. I can't do it. I can't change. Our excuses may be plausible, real, all too true, but they are still just that, excuses.

Do you want to get well?

That is Jesus' invitation. He can do it! He does do it! *Get up, pick up your mat, and walk,* Jesus said. And he did. Do you believe Jesus can do it for you?

If you do believe, if you will believe, be prepared. Getting well, being well, getting unstuck, will require humility and courage. It will take humility to let Jesus in, to let Jesus take charge, to let Jesus do it. And it will take courage to be the new person Jesus will make of you! It will take courage to let go of old habits, of old ways of thinking, of old security blankets. It will take courage to see things in a new light, to embrace a new way of doing and a new way of being. It is easier, far easier, to stay stuck!

And the people around you will make you wish you had stayed stuck. *This is the Sabbath, and it is against our Law for you to carry your mat.* Don't they know who this is? Don't they care? Don't they know this is his first time on his feet in thirty-eight years? And they are upset that he is carrying his mat?

The issue is control, having to maintain some semblance of control over the chaos of our lives. It's hard to let go! It's hard to change! It's hard to let other people change! It's so much easier to deal with the familiar and the usual, even if the familiar and the usual keep us stuck.

Jesus can help with that, too. Jesus can heal us of our control issues. *Do you want to get well?*

Eventually, the powers that be find out it was Jesus who did the healing and they begin to persecute him. They are upset because the healing was done on a Sabbath, but especially because Jesus said that God was his own Father, making himself equal with God. It's a good reason to be upset. It's a fair accusation.

Don't accuse Jesus of being in league with the devil, but do accuse him of claiming equality with God! If it's not true, if Jesus is wrong in implying equality with God, it is blasphemy, an unwarranted and terrible affront to the holiness, the otherness, the majesty of God. But if it is true ...

Do not tame Jesus. Do not make him out to be far less than he claimed to be, by what he said and by what he did. Either be shocked and offended, just as these contemporaries of Jesus were shocked and offended. Or believe. Believe who he is. Believe what he can do for you.