

September 25, 2016

Text: John 5:1-9

Theme: "When you are out of choices"

Have you ever had a problem that has gone on and on? It can be incredibly wearing and depressing, can't it. You try this to overcome the problem, but without success. You try that – with the same result. You keep going down the list of options, but nothing you do seems to work. The problem remains. And you find yourself getting worn down and depressed.

What do you do when you are out of choices . . . when you've tried everything possible but the problem remains? Perhaps . . . perhaps you could look to the man in our text for today. Perhaps you could learn from him, be encouraged by him.

The whole story takes place around a large pool north of the temple in Jerusalem. It's 120 metres long, 40 metres wide and 25 metres deep. Its name is Bethesda. The pool of Bethesda. And gathered together in the walkways and porches surrounding the pool are sick people. Lots of sick people – blind people, paralysed people, lame people, invalids. All there because they had run out of choices. All there because they had no better place to go. All looking to the water which every so often would bubble up and apparently cure the first person who got into the water when that happened.

You can imagine the scene..... People sitting around day after day . . . little purpose in life . . . just left there basically to die unless a miracle happened. Their whole world revolving around a pool of water. One of them – our text says – has been ill for 38 years! We don't know how long he'd been lying by the pool, but it seems like he had been there for a long time.

There was no one there to care for him, no one to help him.... How many times had he crawled towards the water only to be stampeded by others too blind to see him, knocking him with their crutches and sticks, shoving him this way and that. How many times had he slid painfully back to his place let-down, dejected. Who knows, but perhaps by now he'd given up all hope of ever making it first to the pool. Perhaps he just sat there and watched sat there and watched. A man who'd run out of choices.

Can you identify with this sick man and his desperate situation? Some of you can. You know what it's like to be really sick . . . to spend days – maybe weeks – just lying on your back feeling weak, experiencing pain, feeling totally helpless and frustrated. Life seems to lose all its interest. Time seems to go by ever so slowly. And perhaps there have been times where you've given up any hope of being made well.

Then there's another type of sickness that some of us know well. It isn't always easy to see on the outside, but it can be just as debilitating. Perhaps even more so. It's called 'emotional sickness.' Maybe we are controlled by anger or bitterness. Our hearts are restless, we can't sleep, life has lost its joy because we carry on our shoulders the burden of anger. Someone is unforgiven some event in the past remains unresolved..... or we feel that the world has treated us badly. Perhaps others of us are emotionally sick because we are empty inside. We feel as though no one gives us love and so we find it difficult, impossible to love others. We don't feel wanted or needed.

And then there are those of us who know what it's like to be 'spiritually sick'. It's caused by guilt over something we've done. We're not proud of it. And we don't want to think about it. So what we do is we push it deeper and deeper inside hoping that it will go away. But it never does. Unresolved guilt will continue to make us sicker and sicker.

What do you do when you're sick and you've run out of choices? And if you haven't yet experienced those times – of physical or emotional or spiritual sickness – you will. All of us will. And when you do, how can you deal with them? Can I take you back to the text and highlight 2 comforting, hope-bringing truths, and then a challenge.

The first comforting, hope-bringing truth, is that Jesus seeks you out when you're sick. Like he did with that man at the pool of Bethesda.

John states right at the beginning of this story that Jesus had gone to Jerusalem for a special Jewish feast – the Passover. Don't miss the significance of that. Because the Passover is an exciting time in the holy city. People have come from miles around to celebrate it, to spend time with God in the temple. It's the place to be – with thousands and thousands of other excited pilgrims. But something draws Jesus to another place – not to the temple, but to a pool. Something draws Jesus to a different group of people – not to excited pilgrims, but to sick, despondent people . . . to a man who'd been ill for 38 years and who'd run out of choices. And something draws Jesus to us when we're sick and in need of healing. And that something is compassion. Deep compassion for those who are hurting. Deep compassion for those whose lives are anything but whole.

There are times when you may feel all alone, unloved, uncared for. But Jesus seeks you out. He cares too much for you to leave you hurting, sick. So he seeks you out.

And then he offers you healing. That's the second comforting hope-bringing truth our text brings. He offers you healing. ***“Do you want to get well?”***, Jesus asks the man. And you can imagine this man processing these words, digesting this offer. He's thinking: *“For 38 years I've been a prisoner to this sickness. I've tried everything to get rid of it. But each time my hopes were dashed. And after 38 years, hope is something I don't have much of. Yet . . . yet here is this man Jesus offering me a glimmer of hope. . . . Could his offer be real, genuine? Could he really deliver the impossible?”*

Maybe that's how you feel, too. A prisoner to pain or bitterness or anger or anxiety or guilt. And over the years it's worn away at you. And you've pretty much given up hope that things can really change. But Jesus comes to you today and offers you hope. He offers you healing. He says to you: ***“Do you want to get well?”***

And that leads us to the challenge laid down in this story: are you bold enough to take Jesus at his word and receive the healing he offers? The man at the pool of Bethesda does. Jesus lays out the challenge to him: ***“Stand up. Pick up your mat and walk.”*** And the man's response? John says: ***“And immediately . . . he picked up his mat and began to walk.”***

I wish we would do that! I wish we would take Jesus at his word. I wish we would learn that when he says something, it happens. That when he tells us to stand, we'll stand. That when he tells us he'll give us the strength to endure our pain and burdens, we'll draw on that strength. That when he tells us he can remove our anger and bitterness, we'll let him. That when he tells us that we're valued, loved, we'll believe him. That when he tells us that we're forgiven, we'll unload the guilt. That when he tells us he'll look after us, we'll stop worrying.

I love the story of the army private who ran after and caught the runaway horse of Alexander the Great. When he brought the animal back to the general, Alexander thanked him by saying: ***“Thank you, captain.”***

With one word, the private was promoted! When the general said it, the private believed it. He went to the quartermaster, selected a new uniform, and put it on. He went to the officer's quarters and selected a bunk. He went to the officer's mess and had a meal. Because the general said it, he believed it. And his life was changed.

That's the story of the sick man at the pool of Bethesda. Because Jesus said it, he believed it. And his life was changed.

And that can be your story, too. Jesus seeks you out. He offers you healing through his promises. And in the Bible, there are over 20,000 promises. Surely at least one of them applies directly to you. And all you need to do is to believe his words, to claim his promise, and your life will be changed. Amen.