

## Do You Want to Get Well?

*John 5:1-9a*

***[Note: We did not use projection for this sermon, so projection notes are not included. We felt that for this particular sermon, it would be more powerful to preach it the old-fashioned way! Which, by the way, is still effective.]***

Do you have any pet peeves? Things that really irritate you? One of my pet peeves is stupid questions. For example, a few years ago, I fell on the ice. I was moaning in pain when a friend asked, “Are you hurt?” “No,” I wanted to say, “I writhe around on the street and scream in pain for its entertainment value.” Or when I cut my finger not long ago. I start bleeding all over the place, and someone in my family asked, “Did you cut your finger?” “No,” I said, “I just started bleeding spontaneously.” Or one of the worst is, “What are you doing?” when it’s perfectly obvious what you are doing. I’m sitting in my chair reading the newspaper, and someone asks, “What are you doing?” Well, I’m practicing the Zulu war dance! You dummy, you can see what I’m doing. I’m reading the newspaper. I just hate stupid questions.

A few weeks ago I was reading from the Gospel of John, and I came to today’s text. Although I hate to admit it, at first glance, it seems like Jesus is asking a stupid question. Here is a man, lying on the porch, crippled, and has been so for thirty-eight years. Jesus comes along and asks him, “Do you want to get well?” (v. 6 NIV). My first response is, this is an absurd question. Of course he wants to get well! He has been sick for thirty-eight years. He can’t walk. He has no freedom. He is completely dependent on others for everything. What an absurd question—do you want to get well? But the more I pondered the question, the more I realized that maybe it was not a silly question after all.

Do you want to get well? Well, maybe not. Maybe being sick is not so bad after all. Maybe this man has grown comfortable with his illness. He doesn’t have to work. He has no responsibilities. He takes no risks. His life is predictable and secure. Maybe he does not want to be healed. At the very least, I bet he has mixed feelings. And if we think about it, we can probably relate.

When I was a child, I used to get an annual case of strep throat. My throat has always been my weak spot. So every year another case of strep, you could count on it. Now strep throat

is not much fun. Fever, aches, sore throat, lying in bed for several days. But, it wasn't all that bad. My mother pampered me like she never did when I was well. She would pat my head and say she was sorry I was sick and, "I wish I could be sick for you." I've tried to get my wife to say that, but it's not the same. My mother actually meant it! Plus, my mom moved the family TV into my bedroom, which really irritated my sister, and that was the best part of it. All my meals were brought to me. And I got a chocolate milkshake every afternoon. It was a pretty good deal in many ways. I also got to neglect all my responsibilities. I didn't have to go to school, or do any homework, or do my paper route—a substitute did it for me. And, all my chores—like taking out the trash, emptying the cat box, and raking leaves—my sister had to do all of them, and that was the sweetest part of all! Now it was good to get well. To ride my bike again, to play with my buddies again. But I always had mixed feelings because the pampering ended, and all the responsibilities resumed.

My guess is that this man in John 9 had similar emotions. Part of him surely wanted to get well—to be able to walk, to run, to work, to be whole. But part of him was not sure. It meant a whole new way of life. He would have to move from dependence to independence, from no responsibilities to heavy responsibilities. So perhaps he's not sure he is ready to be healed. When Jesus asked him if he wanted to get well, he stalled. He made excuses as to why he could not get to the healing water nearby. This man knew the cost was huge, and he had to decide if it was worth it. Then Jesus told this man that if he wanted to be healed, to stand up and walk. Think about what that represented. The end of a thirty-eight-year stretch of dependency. Now he would have to work, take care of himself, take risks, meet social expectations. The consequences were huge, the price tag high. "Do you want to get well?" The drama was high. He's counting the cost.

And so must we. All of us need to be healed in one way or another. So the question comes to us, "Do we want to get well?" Enough to pay the price? You could apply this question to a thousand different areas. For example, say our body is in trouble. Our cholesterol is high, our blood pressure is high, our weight is high. Do we want to get well? Enough to change our diet? Enough to get regular exercise? Enough to stop smoking? Or say our finances are in trouble; we are in big debt. Well, do we want to get well? Enough to destroy our credit cards? Enough to change our standard of living? Enough to come up with a concrete plan to get out of debt and stay out of debt? Or maybe a relationship is out of order. Maybe we have a strained relationship with someone at work or at church. Do we want to get well? Enough to

act on the problem? Enough to go to that person and say, “I feel like there is some tension between us. Can we talk about it?” Or maybe our marriage is in trouble. Do we want to get well? Enough to call the Counseling Center here at church and set an appointment with our minister of congregational care or another counselor? Maybe our spiritual life is dry and lifeless. Do we want to be healed? Enough to do something? Enough to worship regularly? Enough to read Scripture daily. Enough to join a Disciple Bible Study group? Enough to join a Sunday school class? Enough to pray regularly? Enough to get involved in ministry to others? What is the illness in your life? Do you want to get well? Are you willing to pay the price? To take responsibility? To take concrete steps toward healing?

So we have Jesus asking this man, “Do you want to get well?” By now the man had calculated the cost. He had decided yes, I want to be healed, and I’m willing to pay the price. Jesus said, “Stand up, pick up your pallet, and walk.” And the man did! Now God did the healing, but this man also had to do his part. He now had to take radical responsibility for his life.

So the question remains, do we want to get well, do we want to be healed? People answer that question in different ways. Some say yes; others say no. Let me tell you about two young women from Arkansas who were both asked the question, “Do you want to get well?” Each answered the question differently. First I’ll tell you about Angela. Then I’ll tell you about Susan.

Angela was in a bad relationship with a man who was not her husband. He got drunk occasionally and smacked her around once or twice. Mainly, he didn’t give her the love, respect, support, and friendship she wanted and deserved. So she came to me to complain about the relationship. She came a second time and a third time. Now Angela had plenty of options. She could leave the man; she was not even married to him. Her parents would gladly welcome her back home. They even offered to pay her way to college if she wanted to go. She had other options as well. She could have gotten a job and moved out of this man’s house. Or if she didn’t want to break up with him, they could at least go to counseling and try to improve their relationship. But she was not willing to do anything. So finally, at the end of our third visit, I asked her, What are you willing to do about this? Well, the truth is, she was not willing to do anything. She just wanted to come to my office and whine. I finally told her to stop coming to see me unless she was willing to take action. She was wasting her time and my time just moaning about her situation. She never returned and never made a change as far

as I know. It was just easier to stay in the situation and gripe about it. Angela was asked, “Do you want to get well?” Her answer was no.

Susan answered that question differently. I don’t know Susan, but her pastor told me her story. You need to know that Susan married too young, right out of high school. They had a baby, and then her husband left her. She had to go on welfare—food stamps, government housing, and aid for dependent children. Susan finally got tired of living that kind of dead-end life. She wanted a better life for herself and for her daughter. So she came to talk to her pastor about it. Susan clearly wanted to get well, and she was willing to pay the price. In fact, Susan wanted to go to nursing school. So the people in her congregation rallied around Susan. They helped her find a nursing scholarship. One of the women’s groups in the congregation adopted Susan. They helped her with everything from budget planning to study skills to babysitting. After several years Susan finally reached her goal. She graduated from nursing school, got a good job, and bought a modest but nice little house for her daughter and herself. Susan was asked, “Do you want to get well?” She said yes and was willing to do something to make it happen.

In today’s Scripture reading, Jesus, at first glance, seems to ask a stupid question. But in reality it is one of the most profound questions we could ever be asked. Do we want to get well? Enough to do something about it?

In just a minute I’m going to do something I almost never do. In just a moment I’m going to ask you to close your eyes. Have you ever been to a Baptist revival and the preacher said, “Every head bowed, every eye closed!” We are going to do that in a minute. The reason I want you to close your eyes is to help you better concentrate your thoughts and focus your mind. Please go ahead and close your eyes. I want you to name an illness, a brokenness, in your life. It could be personal, relational, your career, your spiritual life, whatever. Choose something you can do something about. All of us have some illnesses that we cannot change, that we simply have to live with. So choose something you have some control over. OK, name the illness, the brokenness. Now I want to ask you an important question. Do you want to get well? Enough to take concrete action? Answer honestly. Maybe you are not ready, not yet. But some of you here today can honestly say, “Yes, I really do want to get well, enough to do something about it.” If so, what would it take for wholeness to come? What steps could you take for things to improve? Be specific here. List one or two or three things you could do

right away to help promote wholeness. God will help you take those steps, but you too are responsible.

After Jesus asked this man, “Do you want to get well?” and the man was ready to say yes, Jesus told him to stand up. Today, if you want to get well, and you are willing to take responsibility for your healing, then I ask you quietly to stand up where you are. You won’t be asked to walk forward, or to say anything, or to sign anything. All you need to do is stand. Your standing is both a promise and a prayer. A promise to yourself and to God to do your part in your healing. And a prayer, asking God to do God’s part, to help you carry through with your promise. Just stand quietly for a moment. Right where you are, stand. (Wait for people to stand.) God has registered your decision. You may be seated.

**Postlude:** A few weeks after I preached this sermon, I received a note from a member of our congregation. She told me she and her husband had stood during the invitation. Their marriage was in trouble, and they needed help. After that service they contacted a marriage counselor. A year later they are still together and doing well. Almost a year after I preached this sermon, I received an e-mail from one of our members. He told me that he had also stood during the invitation. That day he decided to quit smoking and has not smoked since.

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