The Sixth Sunday of Easter

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May 1, 2016

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*After Jesus healed the son of the official in Capernaum, 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 invalids-- blind, lame, and paralyzed. 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 sick 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. (John 5:1-9).*

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For centuries, it was assumed that the Pool of Bethsaida that we just read about in the gospel of John never actually existed. Even though it is described in such precise detail (the Sheep Gate, the five porticoes), there was no archeological evidence for its existence in Jerusalem, so scholars treated it as a metaphorical place, created by someone unfamiliar with the city.

Then, in the 19th century, the archaeologist Conrad Schick discovered a pool, which he contended was the pool of Bethsaida of John 5. Further excavation in the 60’s confirmed this, and also that the pool was part of a larger collection of waterworks that included the “upper pool” referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But, here’s something that I thought was pretty interesting: this pool was used in the 1st century as an [Asclepieion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asclepieion), a place where healing was supposed to take place by the power of [Asclepius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asclepius), the Greek god of healing, also called “savior” (*soter*) by his followers. Which means that Jesus’ presence there would have been pretty unusual. It is as if a Muslim walked into a Pentecostal healing service, strode up to the oldest wheelchair-bound person he saw, and, right in front of the preacher, healed the person in the wheelchair.

Obviously, we don’t know Jesus’ rationale for healing at Bethsaida. We don’t know if he was making a point about his power versus the power of other “gods,” or by choosing a man who had been lame 38 years.

But we do know that when Jesus comes - out of blue - and asks this man, “do you want to be made whole?” the man offers all sorts of reasons why that was just not going to happen. “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." In other words…

“No thanks, Jesus, I think I’ll just lie here on my pallet and gaze into the pool like I’ve been doing for 38 years, since I know what to expect and I know all of the other people nearby. True, I’m probably not going to get better, but – you know – I’ve gotten sort of used to being here, so thanks all the same.”

I have been wondering about this. What if Jesus walked up to you or to me right now and asked, “Do you want to be made whole?” Not, perhaps from paralysis or other more visible ailments, but from whatever in our lives hinders our ability to live fully – an abusive incident or trauma from our past, a dysfunctional relationship, an addiction to food, to our hand-held devices, to our busy-ness? Or do we fear the cure more than the illness?

When I was in seminary, doing my Clinical Pastoral Education and working in a hospital, I thought a lot about this question, about the process of healing. Why it is that some people manage to recover and get on with their lives, and others do not? What is it that keeps us stuck? My instructor gave me a book by the great spiritual guide, Wayne Muller entitled “How then shall we live” that really changed the way I understood healing.[[1]](#footnote-1) He writes:

“At times, rather than attend to those things that bring us [joy and energy, things that interest and enliven us], we must give the bulk of our attention instead to things that have brought us harm. This is perfectly understandable, [say, when there has been a tragedy in the family or when we’ve suffered a job loss, or have been abused or betrayed]. As we try to heal what has been hurt, we focus all our care upon things that are painful. Clearly our wounds need our attention.

But when we concentrate exclusively upon our hurt, we learn to see the brokenness, losses, or injuries we have been given as the most important things in our lives. We cultivate an attention to these wounds in such a way that, over time, they come to occupy the most important place in our heart. Our wound lives in the center of our thoughts. In this way, we can actually come to love our suffering.

Of course, we do not actually love the pain or sorrow that came to us. Our sorrows are real - and they leave us weary and hurt. But when we give so much time and attention to the process of “healing”– when we fall in love with the feeling of being healed – then sooner or later we will need to find newer, more painful things to be healed from.

Muller goes on to explain that in the natural process of healing, the body vigorously responds to whatever has been wounded, mobilizes immunities, provides nutrients and raw materials for the body to knit itself back together. After this focused time, the body heals. There may be a scar, but once the healing is done, the body moves on to other things.

But, if along the way, we become enamored of the process of healing itself, we tend to stay attuned to fresh wounds, new disappointments, and current deficiencies, so that the healing can continue. With the proliferation of new psychologies, therapies, treatment centers and healing strategies, this has become really easy. But, it can keep us very small – imprisoned in our own healing, trapped by what we’ve come to love. “Seek and ye shall find” applies equally to those things we hope for and to those thing we fear the most, even those things that are painful and difficult.

That is, if we focus the lion’s share of our energy on ferreting out what we believe is wrong inside us, we gradually grow into people who are good a seeing what is wrong. Instead of creating a life of beauty and meaning we may simply become better and better at seeing only what is broken. As Abraham Maslow once said, “If a man’s only tool is a key, he will imagine every problem to be a lock.”

We must, of course, name what is wrong, speak the truth of it, be heard and at times seek justice. We must, to heal, do this for a while. But if we choose to make it the work of our life, we may find that keeps us on our mat, just like that man lying by the side of the pool, accepting that we’ll never get beyond gazing at the deep waters of healing, instead of picking up our mats and walking on.

The alternative? Well, according to Wayne Muller, it is this: choose, instead, to give your attention to what you truly love, attend to what brings you life. And if you can’t figure out what that is any more, start with something as simple as your breath. There is a story he tells of a woman he met in one of his retreats, Christiana, born prematurely deaf, who did just that:

“As she grew, Christiana – rather than feeling broken by her physical challenges – became a determined young girl. She worked very hard as a child, straining against her deafness to eventually learn to read lips with astounding accuracy. Her speech was remarkable for one who had been deaf essentially since birth. When asked what inspired her, she said, “I do what I love.” “I love language.” I love to be able to speak, to communicate. I even learned French, because it feels so good in my mouth. “I also love to play….because my childhood was always such work.”

And then, finally, she added this. But really, “I love breathing.” “When I was in the incubator, I couldn’t breathe; there was no oxygen. So now, I love my breath. Every breath feels like a beautiful gift. I am so grateful for my breath.”

How many of us have such love, such gratefulness for our breath? Think about it. How often do you relish the shape of it, the texture, use your breath as a reminder to be awake to your life? It is no coincidence that the word Spirit also means “breath,” in both Hebrew and Greek. It is the source of life, given by God.

Do what you love. And if you can’t figure that out any more, begin by loving something as simple as your breath. As we become aware of our breath, we come to appreciate how it gives us life. We become grateful for our breath, and then we naturally feel grateful for our life. And out of that gratitude may spring a renewed determination to use our life more carefully, honoring the precious gift that it is. We may then live less and less by accident, less confined by our past or our circumstances, and more mindful of how it is we want to walk on this earth.

Do you want to be made whole? Then take a deep breath, figure out what it is that you love, and as Jesus said, pick up your mat and walk.

Amen

1. Wayne Muller, How Then Shall We Live? Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of our Lives (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 103-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)