

Do You Want to Be Healed?

Deuteronomy 5:12-15, John 5:1-18 (ESV)

January 28, 2007

“Do you want to be healed?” It is the single occurrence of this initiating question that drives the gospel in today’s reading. “Do you want to be healed?” It seems an odd question. But we are scarcely given time to ponder it before it is fast followed with a gracious command: “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” “Take up your bed, and walk.” “Take up your bed, and walk.” This imperative appears three times in today’s reading: once when Jesus said it to the invalid man lying by the pool, again the healed man quoted it to the Jews, and again when they quoted it back to him. “Take up your bed, and walk.” Surely this threefold emphasis, more than is needed for a simple telling of the story, is for our sake, to be sure that we hear the imperative. In fact, the same words appear twice more in the indicative: once when the man did what Jesus said to do, “he took up his bed and walked,” and again when the Jews saw what he did and disapproved, “it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” And this extraordinary fivefold repetition of the command and its fulfillment, of healing and health, of gospel and new life, follows close upon the solitary initiating question, “Do you want to be healed?”

It appears that the man did want to be healed and so he was. In that sense, the question was answered. But this reading is not simply a history lesson. This is gospel. And so the question remains: “Do you want to be healed?” The question remains for you and for me: “Do you want to be healed?” The question remains for the world in which we live: “Do you want to be healed?” Could it possibly be, depending upon our answer, that the repeated imperative and the consequent healing also remain even for us yet today? Lord, help us!

“Do you want to be healed?” This initiating question drives the gospel in today’s reading. And it immediately raises a host of other questions: Who is this that asks whether we want to be healed? By what authority does he command our well-being? What is our sickness? How are we made well? How shall we then live? Perhaps answering these questions will help us to answer the first question well and so to believe, to obey, and to live.

Who then is this that asks whether we want to be healed? And by what authority does he command our well-being? This has to do with the foundation of the gospel, and while it is everywhere assumed, it is seldom stated more explicitly than it is at the end of today’s reading: “Jesus answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I am working.’ This was why the Jews were seeking all the

more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” The man who asks whether we want to be healed is none other than the very Son of God. The man who commands our well-being does so as a direct extension and continuation of the work of God himself in the world. This, of course, is extraordinary. It enraged the people of God at the time. And it continues to capture our attention even now.

The detractors of Jesus understood correctly that by calling God his Father, Jesus was declaring his equality with God. They got that part right. They did not realize that he had it right, but they understood what he was saying. By calling God his Father, Jesus was declaring his equality with God. This in and of itself presents us with a decision to make. Either it is true or it is not true. If it is not true, either Jesus was lying or he was deluded. I know of no evidence for either of those. If it is true, then Jesus is who he says he is, and certain consequences for us flow out of that truth and reality. I cannot help but observe that the people who want to acknowledge Jesus as a prophet only must not ever have listened carefully to what he said. If he said that he was the Son of God but he was not, then he was not a very good prophet, not one to whom to listen. But if he says that he is the Son of God and he is, then he is very much more than a prophet, and he is to be heard, believed, and obeyed.

What is the work of God which Jesus extends and continues on behalf of God and as God here on earth? God was merciful to Adam and Eve, for they did not die on the day that they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as he had said, but instead, he made them garments and clothed them, to protect them. God was merciful to Noah when he saved him from the flood. God was merciful to Abraham when he blessed him and called him into covenant. God was merciful to Moses and to the people of Israel when he led them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and into the promised land. And most of all, God is merciful in Jesus Christ, who lived and died and lives again so that we might be forgiven of our sin and have eternal life. The work of God is salvation. The work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who carries out in the world the work of God his Father, is salvation and healing. So it is that the Sabbath is not only a day of rest but even more a day of salvation. What better day than the Sabbath to save, to heal, and to make well?

What is our sickness? And how are we made well? The sickness of the invalid man in our reading was an unnamed malady of some sort apparently inhibiting his movement. At the same time, it is not insignificant that once Jesus healed the man he also told him, “Sin no more.” It would seem that by this he has named our sickness. Sin is that action on our part which has estranged us from God and therefore from each other. The good news is that Christ has taken that

estrangement and brokenness upon himself in his death on the cross, absorbing the gone-wrongness of our lives, so that the relationship can be restored. Forgiveness of sin, release from guilt, the soothing of the troubled conscience, the taking away of the burden of the soul, the renewal of life, a fresh start—all of this and more is the healing which Christ accomplishes and holds out to us. This gospel of forgiveness is the good news we have been given.

It is from the nature and reality of this healing that we learn the depth and seriousness of our sickness. The unflattering but accurate assumption behind the question of whether we want to be healed is that we need to be healed. The truth is that we are very sick. This includes physical illness but also reaches far beyond it, into the depths of our hearts and souls. To make matters worse, most of the time we also deny the problem, cutting off in advance any hope of help! But on our good days, when we are up to it, we are at least honest enough to admit that we need some help. The prayer of confession which we have prayed together today reads, in part:

Gracious God,
our sins are too heavy to carry,
too real to hide,
and too deep to undo.
Forgive what our lips tremble to name,
what our hearts can no longer bear,
and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment.
Set us free from a past that we cannot change.”¹

That is the hard reality of the nature of our illness!

Not only have we offended God and hurt other people, especially those whom we love, but in so doing we have wounded ourselves in ways that we cannot heal. We are aware of our brokenness, but we are not able to make ourselves well. We have a yearning for life and love and relationship with God and others that is good and right and healthy, but we cannot get there on our own. Our hearts ache within us. We have done things we cannot undo. We have failed to do things that we shall never have another chance to do. Guilt overwhelms us. Loneliness grows ever more deep set.

¹Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Theology and Worship Ministry Unit. *Book of Common Worship*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. 88.

Then Jesus Christ asks us yet today, “Do you want to be healed?” What a wonderful opportunity for us to say, “Yes!” There may be a problem that we have become too comfortable with our sickness and our sin, and we have lost the vision of the way things could be. William Temple wrote of this passage:

It is part of the deadly quality of sin that it hinders us from seeking its cure. It is our will to be cured; but we have lost through past sin the power to submit ourselves to the curative influence. Or else we, half-converted-we, are no longer “dead in our sins”; but still sickly and weak through sin. We need someone to “cast” us into the cleansing stream; and often there is no one to do this for us. So we linger, discontented but acquiescent. How common that is!²

That is, it is part of the reality of the sickness of our sin, our rebellion against God, that we do not want to be restored to right relationship. But the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us something of something new, different, and wonderful. As the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)). This is what it means to be healed, to be healthy, to be alive.

In today’s reading, when the man who was healed was questioned moments later about who had healed him, he had no idea. He did not know who Jesus was, much less believe in him. This is to say that the healing was not a reward for faith, since the man had none. It was instead a sheer gift from Jesus, from the goodness of God. However, the man’s healing did involve his will. It may be the case, not that Christ had to wait for the man’s assent to act, but that the man’s active involvement, his answer to the question, and his assent to being made well, while not a prerequisite for the healing, was a part of the healing.

So, having asked his question and received an answer, Jesus said, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his bed and began to walk. There was no power within the man to walk. If there had been, he would have walked away long ago. How, then, did he walk? The healing command—“Get up, take up your bed, and walk”—contains within it, and therefore communicates to the hearer, the very power needed to obey it. We often see in the

²William Temple, *Readings in St. John’s Gospel*, London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1949, p. 107.

words of Christ, that his commandments give us the very thing they ask of us.³ He says, “Do not be afraid,” and we are not. He calls us his disciples, and so we are. He invites us to experience forgiveness, and we rejoice.

No sooner had this poor man taken up his bed and started walking than people were accusing him of breaking the Sabbath. And he did not even know who it was who had told him to pick it up! Later Jesus found him in the temple. In this finding, Jesus goes beyond physical healing to further conversation and relationship, and, as we see throughout the Gospel according to John, knowing God and knowing his Christ is eternal life. So here is the real gift. Here is the healing from our sickness unto death. Jesus encouraged the man to be grateful and to sin no more. He had been healed from lameness, so surely now he would not want to relapse into something worse and endanger or forfeit his eternal life. There is a very real danger that having been healed, we want to revert to our old ways. The point here is that it will be even worse the second time around. Our will to be healed will be weaker, though our need will be greater. Not to know God’s grace is one thing. To know God’s grace and then to despise and to reject it is quite another, and much to be avoided. The will of God is for health and life. Christ stands ready to give health and healing.

Finally, how shall we then live? How does the ancient but always current gospel apply to our lives today? God in Jesus Christ is inviting us, each of us, to be healed of our sickness, to be forgiven of our sin, and so to embark upon eternal life. It is appropriate that we pray diligently and fervently for the healing of our bodies and our spirits. Sometimes it is given; sometimes, in the unsearchable and inexplicable providence of God, it is not. Still, we pray and ask in faith, and are grateful for God’s care. I think especially of those of you who join us by radio today, some of you too sick to come out and be with us. You are in our prayers for healing. At the same time, we all pray for the forgiveness of our sin. Are we not painfully aware of our need for this greater healing? Are we not ready for this health and for the fullness of life? Trust in the goodness of God; receive God’s forgiveness. If you have already stood up and begun to walk in the Christian life, are you not aware of how much you still need Christ’s help, every step of the way? In this life, we never entirely escape sin, so we welcome the forgiveness that comes fresh every day. The gospel of Jesus Christ is for our healing and salvation.

It is also the case that if we as the church receive the healing of Christ, and become well, then we can become agents of Christ spreading that healing

³Compare Augustine’s prayer: “Give what you command, and command what you will.”

throughout the community. We have an opportunity, and therefore a responsibility, and a high privilege, to engage in extensive ministries of caring, loving, and healing throughout this city, the commonwealth, the nation, and the world.

The late Frank Harrington, one-time Pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, spoke at an Evangelism Conference at the Montreat Conference Center in 1988. He said that Jesus' question to the man at the pool applies to the entire Presbyterian Church: "Do you want to be healed?" Does the Presbyterian Church want to lie by the pool of healing, doing nothing, and wither away? Or does it want to be healed? The question must be answered, and it will be answered, primarily at the local level, congregation by congregation. Congregations will either lie down in their sickness, or stand up and walk, serving God gladly. Congregations and their pastors will either offer excuses for why they are not well, or they will obey the Lord. Either we refuse the healing or we accept it and become agents of furthering the healing. Which will it be for Grace Covenant? Do you want to be healed?

Our prayer of confession for today ends with a powerful and confident request for help:

Set us free from a past that we cannot change;
open to us a future in which we can be changed;
and grant us grace
to grow more and more in your likeness and image;
through Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

That is what we are being offered here. God himself is extending this help to us! Do we want to be set free from the past we cannot change? Do we want to be opened to the future in which we can be changed? Do we want to be forgiven of our sin and given a new and eternal life, knowing God and his Christ? In short, "Do you want to be healed?"

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org