

# “Do You Want To Be Made Well?”

A sermon given by Rev. Ian Gregory Cummins  
to the congregation at  
Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver  
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## **Scripture: John 5: 1-9**

How many of you have ever volunteered at a homeless shelter, or served a meal at a soup kitchen, or had some experience that gave you a glimpse into the reality of life on the street? Just a quick show of hands...It can be jarring at first, can't it? The sight of so much mental and physical dis-ease. The sounds of lives that have come unraveled. The smell of humanity deprived of its dignity.

With that experience in mind, I invite you to imagine the scene as we encounter Jesus today. He's in Jerusalem near what was called the Sheep Gate (now called Herod's Gate for those of you who've been there). And near this gate was a natural spring with a pool. And around the pool there were five porticoes or porches. And on those porches, the text says, "lay many invalids – blind, lame and paralyzed."

The Sheep Gate into Jerusalem got its name because it once led to the sheep market. So we can guess that these invalids would drag themselves down to this pool to beg from the merchants as they made their way into the city.

But there was another reason they chose this particular spot. There was a legend that claimed an angel would occasionally come trouble the waters of this spring. And when that happened, the first ones to enter the pool would be healed from their ailments.

So just picture these five porches, crowded with the sights, sounds and smells of Jerusalem's most in-*valid* citizens, some moaning in pain, some begging for coins.

And there's Jesus stepping over and around their broken bodies, perhaps trying to comfort some of them. And then he spots one particular man, who stops him in his tracks. We aren't told exactly what's wrong with the man. But we know he's been ill for 38 years. We know for 38 years he's probably been dragging himself down to this pool to beg for food and to wait... for the angel.

The story says, “Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time.” He *knew* it. Is it a testament to Jesus’ miraculous insight? Not this time. This time, I think the text is just saying when you looked at this guy, you *knew* – he’s been there a *long* time.

Some of us here today know what it’s like to be stuck in one place for a long time, amen? And some of us here have been nursing wounds for years too, amen?

So let the question Jesus asks the man be our question too. “Do you *want* to be made well?” And man answers, “Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up.” In other words, when the angel comes. “And while I’m making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”

Did you catch it? Did you notice...that he doesn’t actually answer the question Jesus asks? Instead he explains *why* he’s not healed. And isn’t that what we *all* do? The words roll off our tongue to explain why something did or didn’t happen. We’ve got a list a mile long to explain *why* – why we’re still in debt, or still not finished; why we left; or why we stayed.

And all of our “whys” may be well-reasoned and true. But that’s not the question Jesus is asking today. He doesn’t want to know *why* we aren’t well. He wants to know if we really *want* to be.

‘Do you want to be made well?’ It’s a loaded question, a scary question, a powerful question. And it is *not* a rhetorical question. Because sometimes we may ponder that question and realize the answer is actually... ‘no’. We don’t want to be made well. At least not now; or not in the way that it’s being offered to us; or not at the price we would have to pay for it.

And that’s okay. If that’s where we’re at, then better to start there. Sometimes before we can ever think of getting to ‘yes’ we have to get to an honest ‘no’. Right now...no, I can’t imagine forgiving him. Right now... no, I don’t want to stop drinking so much. Right now...no, I’m just not willing to give up this lifestyle, even though I can’t afford it.

There’s something refreshing, freeing, about admitting that to ourselves. There’s an acceptance in that ‘no’. And out of acceptance, new things can start to unfold.

And sometimes our ‘no’ is just ‘no’, because we conclude that something is the best it can be, even though it isn’t perfect, and that’s okay too. Not everything needs healing. We have to be careful not to conflate being made well with being made perfect.

Life, even at its best, isn’t perfect. And insisting on some high-fiber, wrinkle-free version of life isn’t always what’s best. Sometimes the pursuit of a life where we make no mistakes – and expect the same from others - is the very thing we need healing from.

But what if the answer is YES. What if we *want* desperately to be made well. Made well from some physical disease or some mental illness. From some emotional wounding or some spiritual demon.

Back when I played little league baseball our coach would tell us before every game that we had to really *want* it. And if we lost, then he would sometimes venture that maybe we just didn’t want it bad enough. That was always confusing to me, as I was pretty sure I *did* want it bad

enough... and the other team was just better. But what did I know, I was ten and he was the coach.

These days I would recognize that as bad theology, whether applied to baseball or to life. I think Jesus' question is a good one – do we really want to be made well. But the danger is that we think he means that's all we need to be made well. That if we want it bad enough, or pray hard enough, then things will work out.

But then if things don't work out, and healing doesn't come – at least in the form we were hoping for – then we're left asking what we did wrong. Did we not want it enough, or pray hard enough...and that's just not something anybody needs to add to their list of worries. That's called blaming the victim, and it's against the rules. So it's not just about wanting it bad enough.

The other question, and maybe the more important question, is not how much we want it, but *what* exactly we want. What do we mean by being 'made well', exactly? What did Jesus mean? Well, I'm glad you asked, because it turns out the Greek word used here for 'healed' or 'made well' is h-y-g-i-e-s. It's the same word we get 'hygiene' from. And it *can* refer to physical healing in the traditional sense. But it can also mean something more like 'soundness' or 'wholeness'. In fact, the same word is used in the second chapter of Titus to refer to the soundness of a teaching (Titus 2:8).

So when Jesus asks the man, "Do you want to be made well?" he's asking do you want to be made sound? Do you want to be made whole?

When we, or someone we love, are suffering from some physical, mental, or emotional dis-ease, we want them to get better. We want, often desperately, for them to be restored to health. But just like in little league, sometimes no matter how badly we want it, there are factors beyond our control. Sometimes, despite our best efforts and those of modern medicine, the disease takes its course. But that doesn't mean healing can't occur.

I recently learned a helpful distinction between disease and illness. Think of disease as describing the physical and biological facts of a situation. It's the thinning arteries, the tumor in the leg, the congestion in the lungs. That's disease.

And think of *illness* as describing the *experience* of the person as they deal with the disease. The more isolated, alone, useless and afraid they feel, the greater the illness. So two people can have the exact same disease and have very different experiences of illness.

And what makes the difference, for the most part, has to do with people. With relationships. With love. When we're surrounded by relationships of care; when we feel held, and thought of, and a part of a community...then our illness is vastly different than when we're not.

Remember what the man in the story tells Jesus? That he has no one to help him into the pool. He has no one. No family, no friends. When was the last time someone even spoke to this man? It makes me wonder, did the healing of this man begin when Jesus said to pick up his mat and walk? Or was it when Jesus stopped and said hello. Was it when Jesus noticed him, spoke to him, cared enough to ask him, do you want to be made well?

None of us are Jesus and we don't have the power to say stand up and walk no matter how much we sometimes want that to happen. But that doesn't mean we don't have the power to make people well. We have no idea what kind of healing takes place when we say hello to a stranger who looks lonely. Or when we hand a homeless packet to someone on a corner. We don't know the power of taking these flowers to someone who's homebound, or giving a prayer shawl to a friend. We have no idea the healing power of a card, or a visit in the hospital, or a walk with someone who's hurting.

You think it doesn't matter, but this is something we know a little about in the Cummins house this past year after my wife Laura was diagnosed with breast cancer. She's doing very well right now, by the way, both in disease and illness. And let me promise you, the cards, the prayers, the emails, and the love this community showered us with *made us 'well' again and again*. This is the power of a faith community - we can't always cure disease. But illness? That's our specialty. And we must never underestimate the power of compassion and care to make the world well. Healing comes to us in a variety of ways. And angels? Angels are everywhere.