

“Do You Want To Get Well?” – Winter Preaching Series: “Questions God Asks Us” – Part 2 (based on Trevor Hudson’s book by the same title)

John 5:1-9

Third Sunday after the Epiphany January 22, 2012

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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At the beginning of chapter 8 of his book, *Questions God Asks Us*, Trevor Hudson relates one of his favorite stories. It is a story told by Carlos Valles, a Spanish priest who works in India. It appeared in Father Valles’ book, *Let Go Of Fear: Tackling Our Worst Emotion*.

Once while cycling through the warm Indian countryside, Carlos Valles describes how he became aware of a strange stillness in the air. Nature seemed to have stopped, as if waiting for something to happen. Sensing danger, he stopped pedaling, got off his bicycle, and looked around. Suddenly he understood the reason for the eerie silence. In the low grass a cobra stood up with its hood spread and its tongue flicking. Carlos followed the snake’s gaze. It was fixed on the branch of a bush just ahead. On the branch sat a little bird, completely paralyzed. Carlos comments:

I had heard that snakes do that to birds. Now I was seeing it. The bird had wings, but could not fly. It had a voice, but could not sing. It was frozen, stiff, mesmerized. The snake knew its own power and had cast its spell. The prey could not escape, though it had the whole sky for its range.

Carlos decided to do something. He stirred the breeze with his presence. He tried to break the snake’s hypnotic hold on the bird by waving his arms. He shouted human sounds. Eventually his efforts were successful. Reluctantly, the cobra lowered itself to the ground and slid off into the grass. The countryside came alive again with its surrounding sounds. And the bird, freed from its paralysis, found its wings and flew. It discovered its voice and began to sing once more.

Hudson states that this story is a powerful parable. “Many people today,” he writes, “find themselves caught in the hypnotic gaze of the snake. Some are immobilized by fear or depression or despair or by some other dark feeling. Some are trapped in destructive and addictive patterns of behavior. Some go through all the familiar motions of believing – praying,

reading the Bible, going to church – but somehow feel stuck in their relationship with God. As a result, like the little bird, they become paralyzed. They long for a new freedom. They have wings but do not fly. They have a voice, but do not sing.”

Perhaps some of us know what this means. Could it be that some ugly fear of the unknown, or fear of death, or fear of failure immobilizes us? Could it be that the darkness of depression has had a hypnotic effect upon us, de-motivating us and rendering us paralyzed or unwilling to seek help or to use our God-given mental and emotional resources to move beyond depression? Could it be that our negative feelings of inadequacy and inferiority are holding us captive and eroding our faith in God and our ability to walk with dignity and worth as God’s children? Could it be that our worship experiences no longer stir us to mount up with wings like eagles and to soar to the heights of heaven as those who know that we are loved unconditionally by our God who is merciful, forgiving and who raises us to new life in Christ? Could it be that we are in some way – physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually or relationally – paralyzed?

If anyone feels paralyzed today like the little bird in Father Valles’ story, there is wonderful news in today’s Gospel lesson: God wants to free us. Let me repeat that: God wants to free us! However, there are important preconditions that accompany this freedom. Hudson reminds us that we need to be willing to embark on a journey that involves *the challenge of change* and *the risk of obedience*. The reading from John chapter 5 this morning is about Jesus coming to the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem on a Sabbath day. This pool had a long interfaith reputation of being a place where people went to find healing in its waters. However, the pool had a dismal record of providing healing for many people. It is still there today ...you can go see it for yourself ...but it stands there as a symbol of all the so-called self-help promises that are made today in the form of books, dvd’s, do-it-yourself programs, self-appointed gurus, New Age philosophies, political theories, and the like. There are stores with pools of these types of resources. Unfortunately, they usually fail to deliver the expected results of healing and help.

Returning to our text, Jesus notices a paralyzed man who has been lying beside the pool of Bethesda for thirty-eight years. I hope you observe that Jesus never tells him to get in the pool. That is an important observation because Jesus is about to demonstrate a power that comes from beyond the pool with its reputation for healing (or the lack of it). I also hope you

observe that instead of healing the paralyzed man immediately, as he had done with so many others, Jesus asks him this question: “Do you want to get well?”

God asks us that same question whenever we find ourselves paralyzed in one way or another. It is an important and rather impertinent question when one thinks about it. After all, who wouldn't want to get well? Believe it or not, there are some people with a variety of ailments or afflictions of body, mind, spirit, or relationships who prefer the familiarity of the old sickness rather than the unknown and sometimes scary prospect of a new and healthy beginning to their lives. Hudson cautions us not to be too hasty to answer this question affirmatively before we carefully consider the challenge of change and the risk of obedience that God may call us to embrace. Do we really want to live beyond a certain fear, or depression, or addiction, or resentment, or messy relationship, or spiritual stagnation that is causing our paralysis? Do we really want to get well? It is a most provocative and challenging question.

Looking more closely at the paralyzed man in this story of healing in John chapter 5, we cannot help but ask: “What are some of the possible reasons why such a person, who had suffered from a chronic illness for 38 years, might not want to get well?” A sad but true fact is that some people grow so accustomed to being sick, depending on the good will of others, and receiving sympathy and attention that they might become anxious about regaining their health and independence.

A kind of “comfort zone” is created around the sickness or affliction that helps to prop up an individual and to spare that person from having to be entirely self-sustaining. While supporting structures may be essential for a period, or may be permanently needed for the disabled, there will always be people who lean too heavily on community aid and assistance. I hope you are able to recall that the paralyzed man at the poolside in Bethesda had also become a professional beggar. He had begun to rely on the gifts of others to sustain him. “To be healed,” Hudson writes, “would mean having to get up and take hold of life again.” To which I add: Now that can be scary for people who have grown accustomed to their paralysis ... whatever form that may take.

It could be argued that today there can be certain “benefits” that come with being sick. There are people who have begun to rely on and be comfortable with benefits in the form of welfare programs, subsidized medical and civic programs, grants, charitable gifts, the sympathy

and compassion of friends, the emotional support of family and professional caregivers, to name just a few. Please don't get me wrong today: while society unequivocally has a responsibility to provide care and welfare programs for people who are not self-supporting, our society also has the responsibility to see that whenever possible such people are weaned off their reliance on Federal, State, or community-sponsored assistance.

The new freedom that Jesus Christ offers to those who are paralyzed in some way or another is not a freedom that the world can give. It is a freedom that can bring release from whatever holds us captive. It bursts with new possibilities and potential for living. But it is a freedom that we will know when the preconditions I mentioned earlier are met by us: *the challenge of change* and *the risk of obedience*. These preconditions may mean making any one or more of a number of personal responses to move towards wholeness again. For example, Jesus may be calling us to let go of old patterns of destructive behavior, to let go of old harmful habits and an unhealthy lifestyle, to take steps towards greater personal responsibility to be more independent and self-supporting, to let go of others' sympathy and attention that we have grown accustomed to, to walk away from an abusive situation, to let go of bitterness and begin a journey toward forgiveness, to say "I am sorry" to someone who is waiting to hear those words, or to abandon certain character defects.

Notice that Jesus asks the paralyzed man if he wants to get well in order to measure how willing the man is to make the personal changes needed to be whole again. Clearly the paralytic man was not ready to change. His cautious attitude is reflected in a statement of avoidance as he tries to shift the blame to others for his predicament, a common tendency that we all share. "Sir," he says to Jesus, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else steps down ahead of me."

For me the most wonderful part of this story in John's gospel is that, in spite of the invalid's initial resistance to the challenge of change and risk of obedience, Jesus yearned to liberate him. Immediately after Jesus had asked the paralytic the question, "Do you want to get well?" Jesus encourages him to live more freely and fully beyond his paralysis by giving him a direct command, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." It is simply not possible for us to begin to imagine the amount of courage and faith it took for the paralyzed man to immediately obey Jesus' command. If it was I receiving Jesus' command, I suspect thoughts like this may have

flashed through my mind: *What happens if I fall and make a fool of myself? How will I cope without being able to beg for a living? Can I trust Jesus' word? Will Jesus help me if I obey?* Whatever he may have been thinking, the paralytic does what he is told to do. He picks up his mat, and he walks.

Please hear again Trevor Hudson's words: "Many people today find themselves caught in the hypnotic gaze of the snake. Some are immobilized by fear or depression or despair or by some other dark feeling. Some are trapped in destructive and addictive patterns of behavior. Some go through all the familiar motions of believing – praying, reading the Bible, going to church – but somehow feel stuck in their relationship with God. As a result, like the little bird, they become paralyzed. They long for a new freedom."

For those of us who may be paralyzed or hypnotized by some negative force within or without our lives ...who feel stiffened and frozen in the gaze of whatever it is that has got us in its grip ...there is amazing Good News in John chapter 5. Sent by God, Jesus comes walking along to meet us at our Bethesda pool ...at the place where we live out our paralysis. Jesus makes a new freedom available to us – to live, to love, and to serve him. Today, in the power of his risen presence he continues to come to those of us who are paralyzed in our different ways. His question, "Do you want to get well?" brings with it the hope that we can live beyond paralysis ...the hope that we will get up, and pick up our mat and walk ...the hope that we can be set free from whatever holds us captive ...the hope that we can fly again ...the hope that we will find our voice and sing once more.

May we hear Jesus' command this morning: Get up! Pick up your mat, and walk! May we reach deep within us this morning to find the courage and faith to obey. Will we move or remain paralyzed for the rest of our lives? Will we leave this place like flying and singing birds? Do we want to get well? I know what Jesus wants for me. I hope you do, too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.