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Being Made Well

There are a lot of healing stories in the Gospels. The gospel writer John tells us another: Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, and the aftermath created a whole heap of conflict with those keeping the rules of the Law. The recipient of his healing is an unnamed man who neither particularly faithful, thankful or quick. For 38 years he has been coming to same healing watering hole waiting for a miracle. Jesus asks him pointblank: do you want to be made well?

There are words that we try not to use anymore to describe entire groups of people. They have gone out of favor, for good reason. They are considered out of date, impolite and course.

Sometimes I catch myself and fall back into using one of those words without realizing it. Listen to the shift in suggested language. Instead of the disabled: people with disabilities or disabled people. Instead of wheelchair-bound: persons who uses a wheelchair. Instead of confined to a wheelchair: wheelchair user. Instead of the handicapped: disabled person, person with a disability. Mental handicap becomes intellectual disability. Some is not mad: they are persons with a mental health disability. One does not suffer from asthma, one has asthma. (Reproduced from the NDA Guidelines on Consultation, Ireland) The movement focuses more on the person and not the condition.

On Good Friday, I actually changed this following prayer, for it was written in the Prayer Book: we pray for the sick, the wounded and the crippled. That just did not sound right.

The world and our culture are hard for persons labeled by others. It had to have been even harder in the ancient world. The life of the man Jesus came across that Sabbath day must have been beyond challenging. No health care to speak of. No safety-net. No transport vans.

Christians from the first days have taken these stories of healing to heart. The gospel is a message for whole world and the whole person. One of things that marked the Christian faith in the early centuries was how Christians, more than other religions at the time, cared for the sick. For many of them, crammed in disease-rife cities, it could cost them their lives when an epidemic or plague settled in. But they took our Lord's words literally and visited and cared for those who were unwell and suffering.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a complex and very human saint of recent times, was taking a visiting bishop around her hospital and asked him: "would you like to see Jesus?" Around a few walls there was a man lying on a black leather pallet who clearly had visible things crawling on his body. As the bishop stood there in shock, Mother Teresa kneels down and wraps her arms around him, holding him like a baby in one's arms. "Here he is" she says. The bishop asks "Who?" Jesus. Didn't he say you'd 'find me in the least person on earth?'

This past week the church hosted a play reading by a local theatre company. The educational events held around the state are called “The Elephant in the Room” series. Actors, sitting in chairs in our chapel, read through a play about a middle age man who committed suicide. It was not an easy to sit through. Afterwards there was a panel discussion: we heard about trauma, depression, loneliness, shame and stigma and the impact of suicide on the entire family system. And we heard about the ongoing efforts in our schools to educate teachers and students to prevent such loss and heartache. It is a subject that few ever want to talk about. An action that shatters relationships. So many questions go unanswered. Why? Was not my love enough? Were we not enough? What could we have done? What can we do to help?

Jesus asked the man on that Sabbath: do you want to made well?

Where is God for those who want to say: “of course I want to be made well”? I want a full life. I would trade sadness for happiness in a heartbeat. I want the hurting and pain to stop. The noise and static. The self-doubt, the self-harm.

There are times when I have a hard time with Jesus saying: “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” If heard in the wrong way, the words can sound a whole lot like: “get over it; what’s your problem; snap out of it, or just stop it.” But we would not be hearing fully how and why Jesus asks the question, knowing that an answer was not required. The healing happened in spite of the man being a pretty poor self-advocate. The man was no great believer either. Now healed, he returned to the larger community now not defined by his physical condition but invited to more into a future.

Do you want to made well? What might that mean for us?

The gospel story records how no one around him had put the man into the pool when the waters would get stirred up. When the waters moved, the people believed that healing was more likely.

Our lives and faith are not meant to unchanged, unmoved or static. The waters are meant to move and be moved.

How might we stir up the waters of our lives and the larger world?

In our own way, consider taking something on each new day to invite and heal what is broken. Some might hear this as a call to turn in a new direction. Some may respond time to shake things up and push for needed change.

One of the young people who traveled to Cuba with us last month shared how the experience impacted him as he re-entered school life here in Exeter – a place of sharp elbows, high expectations and competing camps. He reflected simply: I am a nicer person because of the experience. The waters got stirred up.

Stand up and walk.