



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
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Questions and Answers

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SCRIPTURE: John 5:1-9 After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶When 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?” ⁷The 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.” ⁸Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

SERMON The concept has been credited to Albert Einstein, although there is no record anywhere that he ever uttered it or wrote it. But the concept goes something like this. “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results.” Variations on that theme have echoed around our consciousness and our culture for decades. It has been picked up by a variety of 12-step groups including Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, as a powerful invitation to change that change might come. In 1980, Jessie Potter, addressing the 7th Woman to Woman Conference, put that concept this way: “If you always do what you’ve always done, you always get what you’ve always got.”

For 38 years that man had been living by that holy pool. And every time the waters would stir and every time healing would be available, he did the same thing each and every week. I imagine that his heart hoped that this would be the day. I imagine that despite not having the ability to walk, his body involuntarily lunged toward that water. But he could not walk, and so every time those waters stirred, every time there was new healing, every time there was new possibility, someone else beat him to it. And the cycle of waiting for the next chance started all over again. For 38 years, doing what he did and getting what he got. I wonder what Einstein would say about this man in our reading today. But then again, I think it’s far more important to see what Jesus thought about this man, and what Jesus had to say about this man.

After all, I want to challenge you for a moment. What do we call someone who in the face of all odds clings to truth? Maybe we would call that person tenacious. What would we call the person who trusts in the holy teachings of Scripture borne out over the test of time

in the face of all odds? We would probably call that person faithful. What would we call the person who follows in the ways of the holy despite all odds? I know what the Bible would call that person, the Bible would call that person righteous.

This man had no chance of getting to the waters on his own. But he knew the oldest truth in the Bible, the one that Cain heard from God's own lips, the fact that, yes, we are our sister's keeper. So he sat there for 38 years trusting that someone from his faith family would remember that long enough to bring him to those waters. He knew the teachings of the Torah, like the one in Deuteronomy 6 that proclaims we, you and I, are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And so he had to know that sooner or later someone would recognize the pain that he'd been in, and they would love him just as much as themselves, and instead of dipping their toes in the water, they would dip his. I think the teachings of the prophets were written on his heart, like the one from Micah which thunders about: What does the Lord require of all of us, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

No, friends, it isn't that man's sanity that should be examined, but rather the way the world has strayed so far from the teachings of God, that he could still be there 38 years later, 38 years of people coming to this holy place, and not one person putting him before their own needs. You heard how he talked to Jesus. I imagine that he sat there and anyone who walked by, I imagine he only had a friendly word for them as well. And yet not one person did what the Lord required of them. Once he was able to get up and walk, I imagine where he went. I know where I would go. I would follow Jesus' every step, waiting to see what else he would do. I wonder if when Jesus was there telling the story of the Good Samaritan, remember that one? Can't you just imagine this man yelling out a spontaneous Amen. I also wonder how many times subsequent to this day that this man came back to that pool, and waiting for those waters to be stirred up so that he could grab the closest person he could find and take them to the waters, just like he had been healed. I wonder how that prophetic teaching written on his heart to walk humbly with God took on a whole new meaning now that he could both literally and figuratively with his God.

Martin Copenhaver, he's a man who likes to study things deeply, he's a man who went through all the gospels and counted and looked at every single thing Jesus had to say. And in the gospels Martin Copenhaver found 3 times when Jesus directly answered a question. But he counted 307 times when Jesus asked a question. And so this question that Jesus asked of the man, Do you want to be made well? It sort of blends in with all the other questions. The vast majority of times, Jesus actually uses a question to respond to a question, to challenge some back who has just challenged him, to make them dig deeper, maybe even to test them. But this one is different. He notices the man, and I imagine that he calls out to this man from a distance so that everyone else can hear what he's saying. Because everyone else around that pool was like that man, with their own infirmities, with their own problems, just waiting to make it to those waters. It's so tempting to see this question from Jesus as lacking.

The NRSV says, "Do you want to be made well?" Well, anyone who's faced a challenge knows that's sort of an answer of "Duh," right? Come on, Jesus, you can do better than that! "Are you here hoping to be healed?" our translation this morning goes. And I've got

to think our guy says “What do you think I’ve been doing for 38 years? Of course, I’m here. It’s not that the scenery or company is all that grand.” But then again, it’s Jesus asking this question, so before we dismiss it maybe we ought to look at it. I do not think that for one single moment that he is testing this man to see whether he’s up to or worthy of healing. I do think he’s testing someone but not this man. Rather, what I think he’s doing is offering this man, this tenacious man, this faithful man, this righteous man, not a chance to pass a test, but rather the opportunity to offer testimony. And here on this day, he answers the question correctly. It’s not really about what I want but the reality is that no one here is living up to our faith calling, no one here is helping me to those waters while they’re stirred, we are not being our best selves as a people or a faith.

I wonder how many Amens were shouted from those others waiting there when they heard this man’s answer. You see, I don’t think Jesus need to hear the answer, but I imagine he knew that others wanted to hear it. But even more importantly, I think who needs to hear it are the people who had come for 38 years to that pool and never once lent him a hand. Those who came for 38 years and maybe after the first or second week stopped even noticing that he was there. He became part of the landscape, part of the architecture. Those like us who come here week after week after week, hoping to find hope and healing. We do so, we do it over and over again, because we expect the same results. Yet on this day we need to be reminded about those that we pass over, or walk by; those in this world we forget even as we run on our way this beautiful place to find God’s grace and glory and beauty and meaning and fullness that swirl in the waters of the Spirit in this room.

Jesus called out over that crowd, not to indict anyone, but I think instead to remind, that they might remember. To remind them and us of our collective calling to be our best selves, both in the way we help others, but just as importantly, as a communal best self, organizing our every breath and every moment on every holiday and holy day, as a day where we are our brother’s keeper, a day where we love our neighbors as we love ourselves, a day where we do indeed do justice and love kindness.

It would be easy in this moment to get a little bit irritated with Jesus, wondering why he didn’t just say the word and heal all of those people who were gathered by the pool. For God knows how long some of the others had been coming as well. But then again, it’s Jesus we’re talking about, and all of the gospels are consistent, that Jesus did heal and cure and save and Jesus even raised people from the dead. He did it a lot. He did it every waking hour. He did it with every breath, until he had to run away to a mountaintop or sail across a lake to catch a moment to breathe every chance Jesus had.

And yet, especially in John’s gospel, Jesus knew that his ministry transcended even that holy calling of healing our infirmities here and now. In John’s gospel, Jesus understood that everything he did was not an end in itself, but rather pointing beyond that individual act to God’s great kingdom that is spreading across the world, God’s ongoing acts of creation and re-creation that we might be recreated, and begging people to give in and to get on board. John’s gospel thunders that in this world of hurt and brokenness, there will always be pain and loss and grief, there will always be sickness and disability. In fact if you remember in John’s gospel, just before Jesus gives his whole life for the world, Jesus turns to Mary, the one anointing his feet, and Judas, the one who is criticizing her, says: The poor will always be here, but I’m only here for a short while. His ministry, you see,

was about showing us, reminding us, compelling us to a better way, the way that that man sitting at the pool knew was the way to live. The way of this man showing up every day for 38 years, trusting that someone, anyone, would help him, reveals to be the only sane way to live in this world at all. For the truth is that going it alone, relying on ourselves, looking out only for number one, and trying to be the first one to those waters has always been and is today a dead end. Even if our culture, our world, our job beckons us down that road over and over and over again with the elusive promise that somehow, sometime, in some way this will be different. That is the insanity of our times.

With Memorial Day weekend, we approach that magical season in the Berkshires where the Holy Spirit seems to descend and bring back life. The Spirit comes and whips up the waters in a frenzied rush of healing. Those of us who have struggled through the winter suddenly find ourselves able to breathe again. And as we enter this life-giving time, we need to remember this passage. If you were here last night, if you were here when we celebrated the community of singing, the beauty of song, you would know that we were our best selves last night when we all stood and sang together. This summer we are committed to reading this book together. In your newsletters that you all picked up this morning, you will see this invitation. It is from David Brooks, it's called "The Second Mountain." It is a reminder of how our best selves as a people is not tied up in our individual mountain-climbing, but rather in the second mountain of community, togetherness, serving one another, taking each other to that pool for the person who needs it.

But before we head into summer, before we leave this passage behind, I think there is something very concrete to remember in this passage. As we approach summer and all the stirring up that's going to take place around here, I want you to think about what you are most looking forward to this summer. What is most life-giving to you? And I want you to think about how that might be a gift to someone else. If you thought about Tanglewood and enjoying a picnic on the lawn, imagine who can't get there or who doesn't know the way, and give them a call and invite them. If you maybe thought about those quiet moment where we find that perfectly secluded spot to just be alone and slow down and think in our quietness, instead think about someone for whom quietness might be oppressive, and invite them over for a cup of tea. As you head out to go to a party, as you head out to go to a place you've been invited, think about somebody who might not have been invited, break the rules and bring them along. Jesus, after all, in this healing was breaking all kinds of rules. He was not supposed to heal on the Sabbath. That man sinned the moment he stood up carrying his mat, to work on the Sabbath day. So think about if you have to break a small rule of etiquette here in the Berkshires to bring life to somebody, what would you do?

Friends, this summer, if you pledge nothing else, pledge this: Pledge not to keep doing the same things over and over again, pledge not to keep relying on ourselves and looking out for number one, expecting that somehow this summer will be different. Instead, open your hearts and minds, find that person who needs to get to the water, even if you don't know them or know their name, and stop and ask that question, even if coming from your lips it sounds just as dumb as the one coming from Jesus' lips. Because in that question, in that acknowledgment, that is where healing will begin. Amen.

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