

## “Do You Want to Get Well?”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for  
The Congregation of St. John's United Church of Christ, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

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Once there was a farming town that could be reached only by a narrow road with a bad curve in it. There were frequent accidents on the road, especially at the curve, and the preacher would preach to the people of the town to make sure they were Good Samaritans. And so they were, as they would pick the people up on the road, for this was religious work. One day someone suggested they buy an ambulance to get the accident victims to the town hospital more quickly. The preacher preached and the people gave, for this was religious work.

Then one day a councilman suggested that the town authorize building a wider road and taking out the dangerous curve. Now it happened that the mayor had a farm market right at the curve on the road, and he was against taking out the curve. Someone asked the preacher to say a word to the mayor and the congregation next Sunday about it. But the preacher and most of the people figured they had better stay out of politics; so next Sunday the preacher preached on the Good Samaritan Gospel and encouraged the people to continue their fine work of picking up the accident victims—which they did.<sup>1</sup>

Did the congregation or its pastor truly act like the Good Samaritan of Jesus' well-known parable? What do you think? Recall that the Samaritan traveled along a perilous road, one where bandits preyed on others. It was on that road that he encountered the victim of a brutal robbery. Yet, in spite of the possibility of being attacked, himself, the Samaritan stopped, made the choice to take responsibility for the stranger's welfare, and then sought to meet that person's need until he was healed.<sup>2</sup> The Good Samaritan did more than just render loving service. He took a risk to make a real difference in the life of another. Is that how the congregation responded to the issue of the farming town's dangerous curve?

It is easy to see why the church of our opening story did not want to get involved in fixing the problem of the dangerous curve. No doubt, that congregation was enjoying a period of stability marked by a wealth of members and resources, along with broad support in the farming town, as evidenced by its ability to purchase an ambulance. I am also sure that the church recognized the critical need for the town's road to be widened and the dangerous curve removed. It would be a strong demonstration of their love of neighbor to make the new road a reality.

However, fear and the need for security came to dominate the thinking of the congregants and their pastor. They recognized what they might lose because of the mayor's opposition and influence. There was the risk of losing church membership, resources, and community status. All that they had worked so hard to gain could be lost. And so, the church decided to maintain the status quo, using the excuse that they needed to “stay out of politics.”

By doing this, the congregation not only ignored the example of Jesus and the Good Samaritan, but they also failed to embrace a God-given opportunity to forge a new path, one that would renew the spirit of their faith community and ensure its continued good life. That's because any period of stability in a congregation's life is inevitably followed by one of spiritual and missional decline.<sup>3</sup> It is a natural part of any church's lifecycle.

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<sup>1</sup> This story, “Social Justice,” appears on page 320 of William J. Bausch's book, *A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers* (New London, Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Alice Mann, *Can Our Church Live? Redeveloping Congregations in Decline* (Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 1999).

Unfortunately, a period of stability can act like a debilitating illness within a faith community, even threatening its existence. The only way to avoid this is for churchgoers to take risks and revitalize their congregational life and mission, whenever and however they can. But, as we saw, fear and the need for security can be powerful forces. A way forward is the focus of today's gospel reading from John 5, although the connection may not be readily apparent at first.

The text begins by telling us that Jesus was in Jerusalem for a Jewish festival and walking past a pool named Bethesda (John 5:1-2). There, he saw many disabled individuals gathered because it was believed that the pool's water had therapeutic powers, especially when they became agitated. All anyone had to do to experience healing was to enter the waters of the pool as they began to move.<sup>4</sup> Among those at Bethesda was a man who had been unable to walk for thirty-eight years, many of those years spent lying near the pool (John 5:5-6).

Jesus notices the man and inquires about his situation. He then approaches him and asks, "Do you want to get well?" (John 5:5-6, New International Version). Strangely, the man does not respond to Jesus' offer of wholeness and new life with an immediate "Yes" or even a "No." Instead, 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 goes down ahead of me" (John 5:7, New International Version).

The man dodges Jesus' question! He also avoids taking any responsibility for his ongoing circumstances! He claims that he can't get healed because no one helps him! This is puzzling since there must have been numerous opportunities over the years for the man to position himself to enter the waters first. Further, it is hard to imagine that absolutely no one would have helped him, in spite of what he told Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Why wasn't he healed already? One explanation could be his fears.

Psychologists tell us that we live with five kinds of fear or anxiety; concerns over death, harm to our minds and bodies, loss of freedom, abandonment, and humiliation. All other worries stem from these five.<sup>6</sup> It is easy to see how three of those fears could have overwhelmed the man when Jesus asked him, "Do you want to get well?" First, the man had been an invalid for thirty-eight years and had probably built his life and entire identity around his disability.<sup>7</sup> Who would he be if he was not disabled? What would he have to do? Next, such a drastic change could have also caused him some emotional harm as he adjusted to his new identity and abilities. And finally, as an invalid, the man was exempt from meeting certain religious and societal obligations.<sup>8</sup> Surely he would have lost those freedoms if Jesus healed him. No wonder the man by the pool avoided answering Jesus' question, "Do you want to get well?"

Regardless, Jesus commands the man, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8, New International Version). Jesus ignores the man's excuse and his fears, and empowers him to enter into a new way of living, which is just what the man does.<sup>9</sup> But, he does so with some lingering hesitation. When the man is confronted by Jewish leaders for violating the Sabbath law, he blames Jesus for his actions, even though he doesn't specifically name him (John 5:9-12). Jesus later finds the man and warns him not to return to his former life and previous ways of thinking. He needed to start taking responsibility for his new life and to acknowledge the source of that opportunity. Otherwise, the man would suffer a worse fate (John 5:14). At last, the man embraces the great gift Jesus provided and tells the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who gave him new life (John 5:18).

This story, however, is not just a simple account about a healing performed by Jesus. Most New Testament scholars agree that it is a creation of the gospel writer meant to deliver an important

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<sup>4</sup> John 5:3; and John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Spong, *The Fourth Gospel*.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Albrecht, "The (Only) Five Basic Fears We All Live By," *Psychology Today*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brainsnacks/201203/the-only-five-basic-fears-we-all-live>

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Bruce, "John 5:1-18 The Healing at the Pool: Some Narrative, Socio-historical and Ethical Issues," *Neotestamentica* 39, no. 1 (2005): 42-60.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Spong, *The Fourth Gospel*.

message about a particular circumstance, using symbolic characters.<sup>10</sup> The disabled man, the Jewish leaders, Jesus, and even the situation described, represent something else.

According to theologian John Shelby Spong, the disabled man symbolizes an early group of Jesus' Jewish followers who were experiencing decline within their community, due to their adherence to old traditions of their Jewish faith.<sup>11</sup> Those customs and expectations, represented in the story by the Jewish leaders, were acting like a debilitating illness for that group of Jesus' followers.<sup>12</sup> Their best hope for healing and a congregational life of wholeness was to be found in living out the teachings of Jesus, as well as embracing his empowering spirit, present in the story as Jesus, himself.<sup>13</sup> Yet, like the invalid, they feared the death of their previous lives, the emotional trauma that would follow, and the new responsibilities they would acquire if they moved into the new life Jesus was offering them. In the end, they discovered that the only thing they could do to save themselves was to set aside their fears and to risk being obedient to Jesus' command, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8, New International Version).

If only the church of our opening story had taken to the heart the lesson of this morning's gospel reading, they would have renewed the spirit of the congregation and ensured its continued good life. A safer road would have been built and many accidents averted. Sadly, that faith community gave into its fears, rather than placing their trust in Jesus and the mission he had set before them. Hopefully, this faith community will not make that same mistake.

Previously, St. John's experienced a long period of stability. But, that stability eventually gave rise to an illness of spiritual and missional decline, which many of you have come to recognize. Now, the living presence of our Christ has taken notice of this situation. Jesus is asking this congregation, "Do you want to get well." He is calling this church to healing, wholeness, and a new identity by the risky path of revitalized congregational worship and life, innovative ministries, and active outreach to the people of Lewisburg and beyond.

Is this faith community willing to place its full trust in Jesus' empowering and guiding spirit? Or, will its fears prompt it to maintain the status quo, making any later healing more difficult, if not impossible? Jesus is waiting for an answer. How will this church respond? Amen.

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### AFFIRMATION OF FAITH – Bruce Prewer

I believe in an innovative God, who does not wait for us to find ourselves, but comes seeking the lost and calling us into a new way.

I believe in Jesus of Nazareth as God's crucial initiative, that when He calls us to follow, Christ also gives us the power to become, both in creed and deed, the children of the living God.

I believe in the Spirit by whom, Jesus still comes to us, calling us to follow Him into an obedience, which is true liberty, and to a humble service, which is the fruit of holy friendship.

I believe in the church as the fellowship of Christ's people, called to respect and support one another through joys and tribulations as we travel the road towards the "promised land" of God's future.

Because Christ has called me, in this I truly believe. Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.