

“Do You Want to Get Well?”

Welcome to the quest. We are glad you are here. Your mission, should you choose to accept, will lead you to many places. You will trek mountainous landscapes and trudge through the lowest valleys. You will experience the highest highs and the lowest lows – joy, beauty, pain, and sorrow. You are not here by mistake; you have begun a quest, and your leader is Jesus. You have followed him and he has asked you, “What do you want? What are you searching for?” You alone know, or can discover the answer. So welcome. Welcome to the quest.

On our quest today, I invite you to *first* observe the story. Close your eyes. Imagine you are there with Jesus, a silent, invisible observer. Imagine the smell of the sheep, the glimmer of the pool, the dust in the air from travelers on first century cobblestones, the sound of many around you.

Jesus is here for a Jewish festival. You do not know which festival, but he is here. He goes to a pool, which is a place where the sick and those with illnesses anxiously await to be healed by the water. Jesus approaches a man who has an illness (perhaps paralysis), and has been waiting many years to be healed by the waters. Jesus asks the man, “Do you want to get well?” (Jn 5:6b).

“Sir,’ the [man replies], ‘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’” (Jn 5:7).

Jesus says to him, “[Rise!] Pick up your mat and walk.’ At once the man [is made well]; he [picks] up his mat and [walks]” (Jn 5:8 – 9a).

Observe your feelings. How do you feel about what you observed? (Joy? Frustration? Anger? Confusion?) Do you wish you could get into the mind of the man? Of Jesus? Do you sympathize with the man because no one had mercy on him and refused to help him? Are you angry with the man because his response seems like an excuse instead of responding with a *yes* to Jesus? Please open your eyes.

I find this text *very* interesting because it speaks to me differently each time I read it. The *first* time I read it, I felt sorry for the man. He was a vulnerable victim, and yet Jesus did not treat him like a victim. He did not wallow with the man in his misery but asked him if he wanted to get well. The man gave the reason for why he was *not* well (a legitimate reason), and Jesus decided to heal him, so the man *must* have wanted to get well.

The *second* time I read this story, I was *angry* with the man and amazed with Jesus. Here Jesus was, engaging with this man, when he could have been with anyone else, and all the man does is give him *excuses!* He does not answer Jesus’ question with a “yes” or a “no.” He gives Jesus an excuse that seems ridiculous. After 38 years, he has been completely *unable* to get someone to help him into the water or crawl into the water before anyone else. Despite the man, Jesus heals him.

We simply do not *know* if we ought to be *sympathizing* with the man or amazed with Jesus’ response to the *unworthy* man. John does not tell us. Perhaps what we can do instead is to imagine *we* are the man.

I invite you this *second* time to imagine *you* are the man. Close your eyes. You have been ill longer than you have been well. You cannot walk, and so you were either brought to the pool or you dragged yourself there. Your mobility is limited to crawling, and perhaps you have been moved against your will. You have tried and tried to get to the water when it is stirred, but *cannot* get to the water first. No one will help you. The pool is large, and perhaps *everyone* here is ill and trying to beat the next person to the water. Over time, you have begun to despair. Perhaps *this* is your lot in life, to be ill until you die.

A man comes to you. You have never seen him before and you don’t know who he is. You wonder, *why is this man here? What does he want?* He instead asks *you*, “Do you want to get well?” *Is he blaming you like everyone else has? That you are the cause of your illness? Can’t he see that you are here, at the pool?*

You give him your reasoning – you have *tried* but can't get to the water first and no one will help you. Open your eyes.

Do you want to get well? What a *terrifying* question. Whether we are the man who has been ill 38 years or we are ourselves, this is a terrifying question. It's a closed question, a "yes" or "no" question, but if we are honest with ourselves, we might not always say, "yes."

We are not always in a place where we are ready to accept the change that is necessary to be well. Perhaps we began with frustration, which turns to bitterness, resentful toward God for allowing this pain into our lives when this was not "the deal." Perhaps we have come to a place of despair, where somewhere *deep* within us, we *do* want to be well, but we don't believe it's possible. We have come to believe the distortion from the deceiver that somehow, we *deserve* to be unwell. We would *like* to be well, but wellness is not for us; we are undeserving. Perhaps sympathy therefore is the best we can garner. Sympathy will do for now.

We were both volunteers at an event in Fresno to help those in need. We were there to offer information on sex trafficking and the hope of Jesus.

I nonchalantly leaned over to my neighbor and asked her why she decided to volunteer. I thought she might tell me that she liked doing humanitarian work and felt drawn to the fight against sex trafficking.

"I'm here because I used to be sex trafficked and I want to help others who are going through what I went through," she said.

I didn't know how to respond. I felt embarrassed by my flippant question and arrogant disposition. I wondered how to cover my embarrassment. So I followed up with another my question. "Can you please tell me how you got out of a life of sex trafficking?" I asked.

"I was 16 when I ran away from home," she began. "I met a man who promised to take care of me. He gave me a lot of affection in exchange for 'working' for him. As time went on, he began to give me less and to treat me poorly. I began to realize that I was not in a good relationship and that I was sex trafficked, prostituting myself to others.

"After a while, my family found me and contacted me. They tried to encourage me to move home, but I refused. I believed that I *didn't* deserve better, that I deserved the life I was living. I had come from a good home, but I came to believe that I *deserved* the life I was living.

"I continued to think about my family and their words of love, encouraging me to come home. Their words slowly chipped away at me. I didn't want to admit that I had made a poor choice or needed anyone's help, but I began to believe that maybe, just *maybe*, a better life was out there for me. I called my parents to help me come home."

This young woman, now in her twenties dared to believe, and had come to believe, that she was *loved*. She was loved for *her* – not for her body, what she could give, or with any strings attached. She was loved for *who* she was, a daughter. While still in the process of healing, this young woman wanted to offer hope to other women.

"Do you want to get well?" Jesus asked the man. Please note that it was festival time, so Jesus could have been *anywhere else*, and yet he *chose* to go where the ill were. Jesus knew about the man and his disposition. He did not label him or accuse him. He invited the man *in* and asked in vulnerability, "Do you want to get well?" Undaunted by the man's response, Jesus looked at this man, whom he created and loved, and said, "[Rise!] Take up your mat and walk" (Jn 5:8). Jesus did not sit at the pool with the ill and leave this man where he was; he commanded him to rise! This man, who had lain in the darkness of his unwellness rose into the light of life.

Jesus looks to *you* with love and compassion, and asks, "Do you want to get well?" (Pause) You may not be ready, just as the man may not have been ready. But know that even in your brokenness, even in the darkness, Jesus comes. He comes to you, asks and waits. (Pause) Jesus, the liberator, the light of glory, the shepherd who goes on ahead of you, has taken on your suffering and the sin of the world to *conquer* it and to set you free. This "wound, which causes [you] to suffer now, will be revealed to [you] later as the place where God intimated a new creation." He is "coming – not tomorrow, but today, not next year, but

this year, not after all [your] misery is passed, but in the middle of it, not in another place but right here, where [you] are..."¹

The darkness is *temporary* and one day will be no more. Behold, the promise! One day, God will come to us and will dwell with us and we will be His people. "He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" for He is "making everything new!" (Rev 21:3 – 5). "In him [is] life, and that life [is] the light of [all people]. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness [will] *not* overcome it" (Jn 1:4 – 5, ESV).

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you." Amen! Welcome to the quest.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 102.