

Psalm 55:23-26

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

John 5:1-18

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids - blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When 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?" The 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." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, "It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." But he answered them, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is this man who said to you, 'Take it up and walk'?" Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you." The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father is still working, and I also am working." For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.

Sermon

We are facing a crisis in this nation, in this state, and in our communities. It is a crisis that we hear about on the news, but often we feel disconnected from, unless we are in the midst of the crisis ourselves. Addiction, especially addiction to opioids, is like a plague that is destroying people, families, and communities. There has been a rise in those who become addicted to painkillers. An incident at work causes chronic pain. A fall at home requires surgery and medication. So often it is real pain that leads to addiction. There is also a rise in heroin within our nation, more readily available with a whole community online ready to get the drugs into almost any community.

And many of us have ignored this problem for way too long. We have said, "It is not my problem, it is theirs." But this crisis is not their problem. It is not a race problem, not a poor persons problem, not an urban problem, not a teenage problem - it bridges all the gaps and no community, no group of people are free from this disease, not even the church. Some of us know this all too well. Doctors who have studied addiction and how it affects the mind and body, have diagnosed this as a disease, a sickness just like heart disease and cancer. The difference, in part, is that this disease, at least at first, makes us feel good. And even once we find ourselves wanting to be well, we find ourselves dependent on the drug just to feel normal. And so this disease carries a large amount of guilt and shame, not just for the addict, but also for the family who is trying to care for their loved one.

How do we respond? How do we react? As a people of faith, whose calling is to love our neighbors, whose calling is to care for the sick and grieving, whose own community is suffering, what response does the church have to this crisis? It must be more than silence.

"Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground."

These are words of desperation, words of abandonment, words of pain and grief. They are not words of praise or words of thanksgiving, but raw words that cut to the very heart of our faith. These are not fake words of someone who is trying to put on a good face, but these are the words of someone whose life is in chaos and pain and cannot see a way forward. And so one faithful response is to cry out, to weep and release our frustrations. Lament is real life, that is why it is in the Bible.

We also must see Jesus' ministry, much of which was dedicated to the healing of disease, and see that if Jesus cared for the sick, then shouldn't the church care also? In today's text we find Jesus asking an essential question, "Do you want to be well." Not, do you want to be healed, not do you want to walk, not do you want me to put you in the waters of the pool so that maybe you could be well. No, do you want to be well, is a question of intent, of willingness to live differently, of recognizing that you are not well and that something must change. For the addict, this is a very real question, because being well is the harder road to walk.

In many ways it is easier to look for quick fixes. The paralyzed man was waiting by the pool because he believed that it had healing power. The addict tries many quick fixes, starts and restarts on recovery, but the disease cannot be fought with an easy fix. We also understand the excuses. No one will help me into the water, recovery may be for some, but not for me. But it comes back around, "Do you want to be well?"

Then comes words of empowerment, words of encouragement, words of healing. "Take up your mat." It is a choice. The man must take up his own mat, Jesus does not take it up for him, but he is there to help bolster the faith.

And then, in the temple, Jesus reminds the man to "Sin no more, so that nothing worse happens." Take up your mat and walk was not the moment of healing, it was only the beginning. Jesus understood that it would be an every day, every minute journey for this man to truly be healed. This is the journey of the addict, take up your mat is just the beginning. Sin no more is the hard road of recovery.

But where was the church in the midst of this story? There was no one from the religious community that saw this man for the 38 years he laid beside the waters hoping to find healing. No one came and helped him in the pool, no one even noticed him. The church was silent. Then, when the man was healed, when he was celebrating that he could walk again, it was the church who was questioning how this happened. Who did this, how could they act on the Sabbath, excuse after excuse, no support, no celebration, no one caring for the man's need and helping him sin no more.

We cannot be silent, we are called to be the body of Christ, and Christ was not silent. We are called to see and respond. To listen when a friend or family member discloses that they or someone they know is suffering with this disease. To be open to encouragement and support as a mentor, friend, and advocate. You can share the PAL group, share that you are willing to be present via phone or email, and in person when someone needs a friend to lament with. Be aware of the situation by educating yourself through health articles and books, and by talking with people who have walked through this dark valley. And as a church, show our love and care for those who enter our building each week. What would it look like if each week we left a gift of support for PAL? One week it could be a treat, another week it could be little notes of encouragement, another week it can be a prayer we write for the entire group, and so on.

Jesus empowered and encouraged the man to stand and walk and to sin no more. The church must seek to empower and encourage and befriend and advocate for those who are suffering today. May we be Christ's healing hands in the midst of crisis. Amen