

A Sermon for Delmar Baptist Church

By Chris Fillingham

“A Choice To Be Made”

John 5:1-9

June 24, 2018

Most of you know that I recently wrapped up a sermon series on spiritual formation, on what it means to become like Jesus. I had someone ask me why I believe the work of spiritual formation is central to our calling as a church.

It made me think about my own spiritual journey,
how often I have gotten stuck along the way,
how easy it is to fool myself into thinking I've got this Christian thing figured out,
how often sin and darkness rear its ugly head through my own life...
hurting those I love,
making a mess of my soul,
keeping me stuck.

The truth is, spiritual formation is one of the most hopeful things about our faith. This idea that we could become more like Jesus, more whole, more alive, more a blessing to those around us...is incredibly inspiring. I want in on that!

But I also know that there are always so many things holding me back. And on my own I'm not going to get anywhere. Sure, I might have spiritual moments and read interesting things...Those isolated events might nourish you along the way, but they rarely make any deep soul shaping change in you.

Because the truth is,

The journey toward healing, toward wholeness...the journey toward becoming more alive in God... is a hard one and a long one. We don't get very far on our own. In fact, it can be so hard and painful that a lot of us never give it any real attention. In fact, there is something in all of us that would just rather stay the way we are.

When my younger brother was about 20, he broke his leg pretty severely. After it first happened he liked to come up with good stories about how he broke it. He might tell you that there was this older lady crossing the street and he saw a bus coming right at her. So, he ran out into the street just in time to push her away, but the bus got his leg... and snapped it.

It might not be true, but it makes a good story.

Or he might tell you that he was playing rugby with a bunch of burly college guys and it broke from the force of three guys colliding on his leg at the same time.

That story is not quite as heroic but it's manly enough for a twenty-year-old guy to feel good about himself.

A lot of you have met my younger brother. He's not a fragile-looking guy. He's a lot thicker and stronger than I am. He always has been. So, the true story is a little harder to believe...and a little more

embarrassing for the twenty-year-old guy he was at the time. He actually broke his leg... playing softball...with middle-aged women.

But the thing is, it really was a bad break. Between his knee and his ankle, his tibia, his shin, completely broke at a ninety-degree angle. It was really bad. He was in the hospital for a week with an immense amount of pain. They put a metal rod right through his tibia to hold his leg together.

Even once he was sent home, he was immobilized... still in a lot of pain.

He could barely get around for months.

A year after the surgery he had to go back and have the rod removed. They basically beat the rod out of the center of his bone with a hammer. He had to go through the healing process all over again....

Well, just a couple years ago now, he and I were talking about all that again. And I could still see some of the pain in his face. **“That was the worst year of my life,”** he said.

I remember. I remember him getting really depressed.

Multiple times throughout that year he said, **“I wish... they had just cut my leg off.”**

Sometimes the journey toward healing is so hard and painful that left to our own devices, we will never get well.

The Gospel of John tells us a story about a time when Jesus went up to Jerusalem. It was during one of the major festivals when all kinds of people would descend on Jerusalem, the holy city. Pilgrims from all over Judea would make their way to the celebration... and Jesus was one of them... one of the pilgrims, part of the crowd that was filling the streets.

On this particular afternoon he found himself over by the old sheep gate where the Pool of Bethesda was. There were all kinds of rumors about this pool.

Some believed angels came down and stirred the waters.

Some believed that the waters had a kind of medicinal power... like the waters at Hot Springs, Arkansas.

So, all kinds of folks would gather there... looking for healing... looking to be made whole. Some would even take up residence. They didn't have much else they could do but go there... and wait for their turn... wait for the waters to splash their way. There was a lot of waiting, hoping, and sitting around.

Scripture says there were a great number of disabled folks who hung out there—the blind, the lame, and the paralyzed. And I imagine they got to know one another over time... like their own little community of the sick.

They might not be getting better, but at least there were other folks who understood them. Everyone there knew what it was like to feel helpless. Everyone there knew what it was like to be an outsider.

They knew what it was like when the festivals were taking place—the streets were crowded, and folks were generous...a bit like Christmas, maybe.

And they knew what it was like when everyone goes home and forgets they're there...a bit like summertime, maybe.

So even if this was a sick community, at least they had each other... and they could be sick together... and there's some real comfort in that.

But, don't get me wrong. There was a lot more going on than just a support group. The story suggests there was an awful lot of positioning and competition going on at the same time. It seems that most folks thought you had to be the first one in the water when it began to stir if you wanted any chance for your own healing... And well, not everyone can be first, can they?

So, they might enjoy each other's company. But when it comes to the waters... well, I imagine all that goes out the window. Suddenly it becomes a little more of a cut-throat place to be. It's everyone for themselves. "Get out of my way... because when it really comes down to it, I'm here for me, not you."

That's what a sick community is like...

Some of you have worked in places like that, haven't you? "Get out of my way... because when it really comes down to it, I'm here for me, not you."

Some of you have gone to school in places like that.

Some of you have been in churches like that.

Sick communities can be found in just about every sphere of life.

In a sick community you might enjoy complaining with one another... empathizing with one another...

but when it comes right down to it...

well, we all know why we're here.

On this particular festival day, Jesus weaves his way through the crowd and finds himself next to a man who's been lame for 38 years. Scripture says that Jesus sees the man lying there and *knows...* in other words, Jesus can tell just by looking at him, that this man has been there *a long, long time*.

And so, Jesus asks him a question... a question that might seem strange at first, but it's really the only question that matters. It's the one question the man needs to answer:

"Do you want to get well?"

Do you want to get well?

And I can imagine the sick man is a little offended at this question. He's probably thinking:

"What kind of question is that? I'm here at the pool, aren't I? Do you think I like being this way? Do you think I like how my life has turned out?"

It is kind of an insulting question, isn't it? The man's at the healing pool. He's been waiting his turn. He's been waiting for the waters to stir and for someone to help him in. It just hasn't happened yet, Jesus. At least that's what the man says:

"I don't have anyone to help me. Even if I try, somebody else always gets there first."

"Somebody else always beats me out, Jesus"

But did you notice?—He's not actually answering Jesus' question. **"Do you want to get well?"** That's the question. It's really simple. Yes or no.

Do you want to get well, or have you decided it's just too hard... or it's not worth trying? After all, it's a lot easier to say, **"Well Jesus, no one will help me... Someone else is always keeping me from it."**

It's always easier to blame somebody, to blame your circumstances, to blame your sick community, to blame the world... than to deal with our own junk, isn't it?

Not only that, it's a lot easier to focus on what everybody *else* is doing,
to focus on everyone else's problems...
or the sick guy next to you,
or the way that sick woman is treating *her* children,
or that sick church across town,

or the sick person that is making up all the rules for everybody else...
It's a lot easier to focus on that sick co-worker,
or that sick politician,
than to deal with our own junk, isn't it?

I know it is for me.

So, Jesus' question is really quite revealing. Because the hard truth is that at some level we have to decide... All of us. In fact, in some ways we are always deciding by the choices we make or don't make. Do we or don't we want to get well?

If you're really honest with yourself... do you? Or would you rather just have your leg cut off?

Richard Rohr writes, "**Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control, power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. We're often given a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self; and the result has been the spiritual disaster of 'Christian[s]'....**"¹

Sure, we sincerely like Jesus and want to be obedient disciples. We want to do things right and be good people. And we like to come to church and leave feeling good.

But when it comes to deeper things, when it comes to the transformation of our deepest motivations... the ones that drive us and shape us, well, that's a different story.

We're not sure we're ready to let go of trying to control our lives,
or to stop obsessing about our survival and security.

We're not as ready to walk away from our insistent pursuit of esteem and affection.

Transformation on that level is the aim of spiritual formation. That's why it's not just about what you know, think, or feel. It's what becoming like Jesus is really about. But it's costly stuff. It's full of all kinds of uncertainties.

It might mean leaving what we've known... like our spot that we've claimed next to the pool. It might mean leaving what we've known for 38 years, where suddenly there is something new expected of us.

Or it might mean entering a darkness... It might mean letting go of some things that we've held onto for a long, long time... and that's hard. It's even hard to let go of the things that have been making us sick because at least they're familiar.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the 12 Steps*

Healing on the deepest levels can be painful business. In fact, it may even feel a lot like dying, like a cross. Remember what Jesus said? **“Whoever tries to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will save it.”** That’s what Jesus is trying to tell us.

Spiritual Formation is about dealing with the real issues
...rather than being a church that is serving fast-food religion.

Jesus walks up to the man who’s been sitting there with his brokenness for 38 years and asks, **“Do you want to get well?”** And then he says about the most insensitive thing you could say to a lame man. **“Why don’t you get up and walk?”**

It’s like rubbing salt in a wound. I’m not sure what happened to Jesus’ compassion here. I mean, there are no words about God’s love. Jesus doesn’t tell the man about forgiveness and grace, not at first anyway. There’s nothing about how things will get better in the sweet by-and-by.

It’s more a kick in the pants. **“Get up,”** he tells the man... whose legs don’t work. **“Get up.”**

And here we bump up against one of the great paradoxes of our faith. The paradox at the heart of how spiritual formation happens. Healing, wholeness—our deepest salvation—our becoming like Christ, it occurs within two seemingly opposite realities.

One the one hand, ***it is pure grace***... you can do nothing to achieve it.

But on the other hand, ***it is also work***... and it will not come to you apart from effort and practice.

There is ***always*** grace that is flowing to you from the heart of God... and it’s your journey to live deeper into it. ***But there is spiritual work we must do***... practices that enable us to open up to that grace,

practices that enable us to be healed (B. Burleson),

practices that form who you are becoming,

practices that form your deepest desires that are shaping your life. **“Do you *want* to get well?”**

What do you really **want**? Do you even know?

Part of moving toward wholeness and healing is to engage in spiritual work...

To “get up,” as Jesus so bluntly puts it.

To find those spiritual practices that nurture the soul.

And those practices can be all kinds of things.

I recently heard a spiritual director offer a definition of contemplative practices, but it’s also good for spiritual practices. I’ve tweaked it some, but it’s basically using Joe Stebil’s definition.

“A spiritual practice is any practice

that you repeatedly enter into

with your whole soul: (mind, heart, and body)

that awakens, deepens, and sustains within you an awareness of God’s life

in you and around you.” [repeat]

“Get up,” Jesus says. I mean if you want to get well,
if you want to be different, then get up.

Start walking.

But remember this is not a quick fix.

There is a road to walk for the rest of your life. It's a life-long road.

And the road of following Jesus takes new courage in each new season of life. So you've got to take the long view.

Spiritual formation isn't about what you get this month or next, it's about who you are becoming next year and the year after.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to live my life, or even the next few decades, protecting my ego, or licking my wounds, or being driven by my ambitions.

I want to live from a deeper place of truth and love flowing through me.

I want to be made well.

Maybe you do too.

Jesus tells us that we're going to need to make some changes... maybe some that even seem impossible. "Get up, take your mat, and walk."

Get up from your self-pity.

Get up from the blame game.

Get up from your pride that keeps you there.

Get up from where you've been hiding.

Get up from that unhealthy community that likes to keep you with them.

And walk away from all of those, "the sin that so easily entangles you." (Hebrews 12:1)

Walk away from always trying to have the answers yourself and impress everyone.

Walk away from trying to do everything right and please everyone.

Walk away from your addiction to your self-image.

Walk away from your self-importance.

Walk away from your self-protection.

Don't you want to get well? It's past time, isn't it?

Get up.

Start Walking. And keep walking.

Because along this road, you will discover the grace of God that is already here making you whole along the way.

Amen.

Reflection:

"It is not you that shapes God; it is God that shapes you. If you are the work of God, await the hand of the artist who does all things in due season. Offer him your heart, soft and tractable, and keep the form in which the artist has fashioned you. Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of his fingers."

– *Irenaeus (130-202 AD)*