

# TO BE WHOLE

May 26, 2019

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Text: John 5:1-9

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## SCRIPTURE

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John 5:1-9

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 Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water. Whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease that person had. 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.

The Word of the Lord... Thanks be to God

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## SERMON

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This week I came across a story about the longest continuous ongoing laboratory experiment, according to the Guinness Book of World Records. (It is amazing what you can find on the internet.) It is called the “Pitch Drop Experiment” and it began in 1927 at the University of Queensland, in Brisbane, Australia, so it has been going on for 92 years. Thomas Parnell was the professor of physics at the university at that time, and he wanted to show his students that everyday materials have extraordinary properties. The experiment demonstrates the fluidity and viscosity, or thickness, of pitch, a derivative of tar. Pitch is the world’s thickest known fluid and was once used for waterproofing boats. In fact, it is mentioned in the book of Genesis as part of Noah’s instructions for building the ark. At room temperature, pitch looks and feels solid. You can shatter it, if you whack it with a hammer. But actually, the substance is a liquid.

In 1927, Professor Parnell boiled up some pitch so it was in a more fluid state and poured it into a sealed funnel. He allowed it to cool and settle for three years. Then he cut off the funnel’s stem. Since then the pitch has slowly dripped out of the funnel, so slowly that it took eight years before the first drop fell into a beaker below the funnel. The first drop fell in 1938, the second in 1947, the third in 1954. The pitch has dripped at a rate of about one drop every 8 years until between 1988 and 2000, when it took 12 years for the next drop to fall, and then 13 years for when the last drop fell in 2014. There has been a good deal of debate as to why it is now taking longer for the drops to fall. Some say it is the building’s air conditioning that was installed in the late ‘70’s, causing the pitch to be at a lower temperature and therefore thicker. Others say it is because there is less pitch in the funnel, so less weight pressing down on the drop. So far nine drops have fallen in 92 years. They are anticipating the tenth drop to fall somewhere around the centennial of the experiment, around 2026 or 2027.

Incidentally, no one has actually witnessed the falling of a drop. In the past, as it was getting close it would be checked on a regular basis, but no one actually saw it happen. Now there is a live webcam on the experiment, so the whole world can watch the tenth drop as it forms and develops into the critical mass that will allow it to fall.

Now I realize there are all sorts of factors relating to chemistry and physics with this experiment, but I am much more fascinated by what it says about human nature. In this modern age, people are often accused of being too impatient, wanting instant gratification, and that may well be true. But there is also the other side where sometimes human beings are willing to wait and wait for a very long time for something that no one has any idea when it will occur.

The longevity of the pitch drop experiment reminded me of our scripture lesson for this morning. It is a story of someone waiting a long, long time for something to happen, something that no one had any idea when it would occur. It is hard to say how all that time changed the one who was waiting, but it certainly was a factor in who he was and how he regarded his situation. So let's go through this story in detail, in order to fully understand what was going on.

The story begins by mentioning that Jesus was in Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holidays. Then we are told of a very particular location. On the north side of the old city of Jerusalem there was a gate in the city wall called the Sheep Gate. Near this gate there was a pool with five porticos or porches built around it. It is one of the few places from Jesus' day that modern archeologists are positive they have located. They have excavated the ruins of this pool and these porches. Years ago when I visited Jerusalem, I stood in the actual spot where this story took place.

There is some disagreement as to the name of this pool. Our pew Bibles call it Beth-Zatha, but it is more commonly known as Bethesda. It is a very ironic name. In Hebrew, Bethesda means "house of mercy or kindness." Now, since you have already heard the story, you might think it is a very good name. The text says that "at certain seasons" an angel would come down and stir up the waters. We are not certain exactly what would happen but the common belief was that when the waters bubbled up the first one in the water would be instantly cured of any disease.

So doesn't that make "House of Kindness" a good name? After all, people were being healed. Isn't that kindness? Well, I would respond in two ways, and the first connects with my opening story of the pitch drop experiment. We are not told how often the waters would be stirred up. Was it about once a month? Two or three times a year? What if it only happened once every two or three or eight or twelve years? Is it really a kindness if these suffering people had to wait for such long periods of time before any hope of an end to their suffering?

But the main reason I question the name of this pool, is that the text says that only one person at a time was healed. A mob of people with all sorts of illnesses and disabilities crowded around the edge of this pool; each one hoping he or she would be the first one in; each one eager, anticipating, wanting it so badly. Yet only one would be healed. One would win, the rest would lose. For every bit of kindness, probably hundreds would be disappointed. So is that really a kindness? Often attempts at kindness have a double edge to them. There can be a harsh, cruel side to what may initially be perceived as kindness.

So that is the setting to this little story. We are then introduced to one of the characters, an unnamed man who was suffering. Today we would have at least a name for his condition. We would say he had polio or cerebral palsy or muscular dystrophy. But the Greek word to describe this man is interesting. The root word means "strong" or "able" or even "firm," and then a negative prefix is added to it. So it literally means "un-strong" or "dis-abled" or "in-firmed."

Whatever his disability was, John tells us that this man had been suffering with it for thirty-eight years. It does not say he had been sitting by that pool for that long, but it does say he had been there a long time... waiting... and waiting. How many of those years did he try to be the first in the water? Who could blame him if he gave up after even two or three years? You wonder if he still even tried. Maybe a little, but I doubt he put much effort into it. He had nowhere else to go, nothing else to do. So he sat there, year after year. All this gives us a complete picture for the drama that is about to unfold. In the House of Kindness there lay a man without hope. Then Jesus came along. Jesus saw the man lying there and knew what had been happening. He knew all about the man's condition and how long he had been waiting. Jesus asks him a remarkable question. He said to the man, "Do you want to be made well?" He did not ask, "Do you want me to heal you?" Or even a polite "Can I help you?" No, the question was directed to the sick man and only about him and his condition.

Do you want to be made well? Actually a better translation would be “Do you want to be whole?” The Greek word here is often used in connection with physical health, but when it is used that way it means something like being “sound of body.” It means complete, balanced, proper, rational, as in having a sound mind. It means more than just being able to function. It means reaching full potential, doing everything that needs to be done. The exact wording of the question was interesting, but so was the man’s reply. The question was a yes or no question. Do you want to be whole? Yes, or no? But the man did not reply yes or no. He answered with an excuse. It is almost as if he says, “It does not matter whether I want to get well. Of course I want to. But here is the reason why I can’t...”

There is a little mini-lesson here on prayer. I have heard people say they have trouble praying because they are not sure they will get it right and say the right thing. Well, here is an example of someone who said the wrong thing and it did not matter one little bit. Jesus heard the unspoken, “Of course I want to get well.” Our Lord does not just listen to our words. Our Lord is able to hear the deep desires and longings of our hearts.

But let us think for a moment about the answer the man gave. He said, “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.” It raises a question of why. Why didn’t he have anyone to help him? Wasn’t there a friend or a relative to give him a hand when he needed it? We do not know for certain, but I think it was the Bethesda system itself. You would think they would have set up some sort of decent and fair method of determining who had been there the longest, and allow that person to go in the water first and have the best chance of a healing. But evidently, that was not the case. It was a cutthroat competition of winner take all. Perhaps this man did have others who would help him, but they could not sit with him 24-7. So the timing was never right when the waters were stirred up. Just like no one has seen the pitch drop fall, so no one was there to help him when the time was right. Whatever the reason, this man had fallen between the cracks, as we say today, and the system was not working for him.

Regardless of why he had no one, it is clear from his answer that this man had no idea who Jesus really was. He had been waiting beside that pool for so long that it had become his entire world. He had been staring at that water waiting for something to happen, and that was all he could see. His only solution to his problem was to have someone help him to be first in the water. He could not conceive of any other possibility. Perhaps he was thinking that Jesus might help him into the pool, but that was the best he was hoping for.

But instead of Jesus replying, “Sure, I would be glad to help you into the water,” he said something incredible. He said, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” That was a critical moment for this sick man. I believe he could have stopped a miracle from happening right then and there. If he had chosen to stay within his little world of the pool of Bethesda, if he had decided that his hope was in those magical waters, and that was his only hope; if he had rejected Jesus’ words as a stupid joke, he would not have been healed. He would have laid beside the pool for the rest of his life.

If he had decided that his only hope was in those waters, he would have been something like Dr. Alexandre Manette, a rather tragic character in Charles Dickens’ classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Dr. Manette was unjustly accused and imprisoned for 20 years in the infamous Bastille prison of Paris. Though he was an intelligent, educated medical doctor, during his years in this dungeon he learned a new trade as a cobbler, making shoes. Finally, the day comes when the revolutionaries storm the Bastille and release all the prisoners, including Dr. Manette. However, the bright sunlight terrifies the good doctor and he is miserable. He returns to his home, yet for a long time the only way he is calm and happy is for a servant to lock him in a small attic room with his cobbler tools. There he spends his days stitching together leather and hammering on the soles of shoes as he did for so many years.

Jesus was offering this man by the pool the bright sunshine of wholeness and freedom, yet he could have been like Dr. Manette. All he can comprehend is the dark gloom of his prison cell where he has waited for so long. All this sick man knew was his little world sitting there beside the pool. He could have chosen to remain there and nothing would have changed.

It has been said that the seven deadly words in a church are: *We have always done it this way*. We do not know exactly what was going on at this pool, but at one time or another something good must have happened. Whether it was actual healing or something else we will never know, but there must have been something behind the name House of Kindness. But whatever had happened in the past, it was not working for this man now. The same can be said for many churches. The system that worked very well in the past is not working now. Then an opportunity opens up. Jesus wants to do something new, liberating and life giving. But the church cannot imagine anything beyond the same old system. The familiar routines and patterns are preferable to the freedom, to the hope being offered.

This is often the case for a church, but is certainly true for each of us on an individual basis. All too often we see one solution and one solution only to our problems. We think there is only one way that God can fix things. We have always done it this way. We have always had this understanding or perspective on the way things are. But God continues to work in our lives, opening up the doors and flooding our lives with sunshine. Unfortunately, we have been waiting so long in the darkness we are unable to comprehend the light.

But that is not what happened in our story. Jesus came into this man's life and opened it up to a whole new way of thinking. Jesus heard the inner cry of his heart, even if he did not express it very well. Jesus offered him something he never thought possible. If he would simply do what Jesus told him to do he would be whole. The text says the man did not even waiver. For whatever reason he suddenly realized there was a wonderful new possibility right there in front of him. The text says, "At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk." He was no longer infirmed or disabled. He was healthy, able-bodied. He was made whole.

It is a fascinating little story. I would like to end with one last thought. You notice the sick man was not looking for Jesus. Jesus came to him. The sick man did not know who Jesus was. He did not understand what was going on. He did not say the right things. There is no evidence that he had any faith at all in what Jesus could do for him. Yet, in an instant his life was transformed and he was made whole. We have a word for this. We call it grace. By grace, Jesus comes to us. He comes to those who are un-strong and dis-abled; to those who cannot see any other options; to those who are hopeless in a house of kindness; to you and to me, and he asks a question, "Do you want to be made well?" Do you want to be whole?

It is so easy to make excuses. It is easy to do things the way you have always done them. It is easy to get locked into a system even though it is not working for you. It is easy to see only one way out of your current situation. It is easy to focus on the stirring of the waters. But listen to what Jesus is asking, "Do you want to be whole?" If you hear him asking you that question today, then I would urge you to forget all the excuses. Just answer, yes or no. If the answer is yes, then listen to what Jesus is telling you. Do what he says and be open to the freedom and sunshine of the transforming love and grace of God that will make you whole. So listen. Hear nothing but the question. Answer and allow what will happen to happen. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.