

Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

By the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem, there was a pool called Bethesda, where a community of the blind, lame, and paralyzed people were gathered. One day Jesus was going by that place. A man had been there for thirty eight years. Jesus looked at him and said, “Do you want to be healthy?”

That might seem like a no-brainer. Of course we want to be healthy! But if you think about it, some people might choose to stay unhealthy. It can become familiar and even comfortable—like a role we know well. When people expect less from you, it’s easier to blend into the background and avoid trouble. Staying sick can feel safer than the risks of change.

My Grandpa, who died about twenty four years ago, was sick for a long time. He was an alcoholic. He had suffered a lot in his life. He was treated badly as a child. He saw terrible things in World War II. He suffered from backpain. He was something of a rock for his many siblings who became sick, several of whom died young. Blackberry brandy was Grandpa’s medicine, his way to cope. However, his alcoholism had devastating effects on his marriage, his children, and these effects continue to reverberate down to the second and third generation.

My dad could see, especially after Grandpa had retired, that his alcoholism was killing him. He looked unhealthy. His body was shutting down. I’m very proud of what my dad then decided to do, because I know it wasn’t easy. Dad organized an intervention that would coincide with a routine visit Grandpa had scheduled with his doctor. He worked with Fountain Treatment Center in Albert Lea, with counselors there. His hope was that Grandpa would enter residential treatment, which happened to be located next door to the clinic.

So when the time had come, when Grandpa’s check-up was done, he and Grandma were surprised by all the people coming into the small doctor’s office. The doctor told him that his body couldn’t go on as it had. My dad and my aunts and uncles told Grandpa how his alcoholism had affected them. Pastor Thompson, my childhood pastor, was there too, and he had his say. Grandpa was unhappy. Grandma was very upset.

Eventually everyone had had their say and it was time to leave. Grandpa didn’t agree to go to treatment. They were all walking out of the clinic. The way the buildings were situated was that the treatment center was in one direction, and the parking lot was in the other. The sidewalk that they were walking on came to a tee, and which way Grandpa turned would show what he had decided to do. Either he would enter treatment or go on living as he had.

At this point Pastor Thompson showed remarkable courage. He hurried on ahead and stood on the sidewalk that would go to the parking lot. Grandpa and Grandma would have to walk around him to get to the car, and that was, in fact, the way they turned. Grandpa walked up to Pastor Thompson, who just stood there. He didn’t say anything. Grandpa could be a very ornery man, so I admire Pastor Thompson for standing there. Grandpa looked at him, then he looked at Grandma, and he said, “Alright. Let’s go.”

They turned around and walked into the treatment center where Grandpa detoxed from his alcoholism. He underwent weeks of therapy. The family had therapy too. Grandpa remained sober for the rest of his life, which I'm thankful for, because otherwise I never would have gotten to know my real Grandpa. The sober Grandpa I knew and loved was quite different from the man he used to be.

Let's return to that question Jesus asked the disabled man: **"Do you want to be healthy?"** Why did Grandpa first turn toward the parking lot instead of the treatment center? Because change is hard. Turning toward the treatment center meant leaving the life he knew, laying down the defenses he had relied on for years, and beginning a new way of life in his 60s. That takes courage. It's always easier to keep walking the same familiar path, even if that path is killing you.

The most fundamental teaching of Jesus is when he would say: **"Repent and believe the Gospel."** There is nothing more fundamental than that. It is faith. There are two parts. To repent means to change your ways or to change your mind. The Gospel is the good news that you are forgiven. You are not stuck. You are not damned. In fact, health and life await you!

All of our readings today talk about faith in one way or another. Our Old Testament reading talks about Abraham—that great man of faith. He left his comfortable home where all his relatives lived because God promised him Canaan. He believed that his descendants would be like the stars, even though he and Sarah were childless and very old. At the end of the reading is that remarkable passage, often quoted: **"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."** He was on the path of life.

In our Epistle reading there was a listing of believers from the Old Testament: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah. It says, **"They all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar... They desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one."** They wanted life, not death. They believed that this is what God wanted for them too, and they were willing to go through many troubles in order to get it.

In our Gospel reading Jesus teaches us new and unusual thought patterns that come with faith. Instead of relying upon ourselves or looking to idols—idols such as the numbness or alcohol or the conceit and satisfaction with riches—we should look to God. You are free when you are with him. He'll take care of you. Just look at how well he cares for the birds, and you are much more important to him than birds!

God wants health and life. The devil wants slaves, sickness, and despair. These fight against each other. We get caught in the middle—weak in faith, tempted to sin.

You know why you sin. You like it. It gives you power, or it gives you comfort, or it helps you cope. You also know that your sin really isn't good for you. It makes you sick. So why do you do it? It's almost like there are dark forces that want to keep us in our misery. Although they make us miserable, they do give us this one benefit. They'll make it easy. You don't need to learn anything. You don't need to change. Just keep doing what you have been doing.

Another pithy statement is to the point here. It's from 1 John chapter 3 where it says: **"The Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil."** That is a very good summary of what Jesus is all about. He has come to destroy those dark, enslaving powers that keep us sick and miserable. He opens up the way to freedom, health and life.

The devil wants you to believe that you can't change. Nothing will ever change. You've messed it up and nothing can be done for you. You've been sick thirty-eight years. But then Jesus happens along with his message: **"Do you want to be healthy?"** "Do you want to believe?" "Do you want to be on the right side instead of the wrong side?"

As we've already discussed, this question is more difficult than it seems. Do you want to change? Do you want to repent? Do you want to learn, to grow? Do you want to live and not die, so that you can proclaim the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light?

Take the plunge! Make the change! That disabled fellow walked, carrying his mat, after thirty eight years. My Grandpa changed his life completely. Alcohol had become the most important thing in his life. It ruled him. Through humility and hard work he fought and defeated the power that had enslaved him for many decades.

So here we are, each of us with our own familiar paths, our own worn-out mats we've been lying on for years. Jesus still comes with the same question, not to shame us, but to invite us. And when we rise—whether it's from a bed by a pool, or from a lifetime of bad habits, or from the small sins we've made peace with—we discover that the path ahead is not empty, but filled with life and freedom.

As John says in that same section I referenced earlier: **"Dear friends, we are children of God now. What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is that when he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is. Everyone who has this hope purifies himself just as Jesus is pure."**

Repent! Believe the good news! You will see Jesus and not be ashamed.

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