

JESUS AND THE PLATINUM RULE

*a sermon for May 22, 2022 by The Rev. Scott Dalgarno
based on John 5:1-9*

I want to begin with a true story told by Jeff Anderson, age 13, of San Antonio --

It's 7:30 a.m.: time to go to school. I pull on the blue warm-up jacket I wear every day, no matter what the weather. I care only about how I can hide beneath that loose-fitting blue jacket. I feel wrong. I feel fat. I bounce when I walk. I am afraid to go to school, but this is America: I have no choice.

I don't use the restroom at school. I don't answer questions in class. I practically don't exist. At lunch, I sit by myself and hope no one will try to pick a fight with me.

Cynthia asks if she can join me. We are outcasts together: She eats my tater tots, grabbing them with her long fingernails, but I don't care. With her, at least, I am not alone.

People say I have a goofy walk. I am so afraid of looking odd at times that I forget how to walk. There I'll be, in the breezeway of Burnet Junior High, frozen, unable to remember how to swing my arms or breathe. Somehow, I get the impression that each arm is supposed to move with the corresponding leg. I practice walking behind the six-foot-high privacy fence in my backyard, making sure my right arm swings forward with my right foot. I practice so much that I make my walk worse. I get a new name: Robot Boy.

Life is so hard for some people. It's sad.

I'm thinking of a man in the gospel, an outcast, who has it tough, too. In the story, as we have it from the Gospel of *John*, there was a festival of the Jews in Roman controlled Jerusalem, and Jesus went up to the city - - doubtless there was entertainment – booths with toys made of wax and wood, ceramic bowls, storage jars made of clay, food booths, magicians.

On this particular day, Jesus goes to a place outside the festivities.

A place for those who never celebrate; a place with five porticos, full of mats upon which lay the blind, the lame. The gospel tells the story of a man who is paralyzed. He had planted himself beside a supposed magic pool 38 years before this day and he is still there. Thirty-eight years – that’s longer than most people lived in the first century.

The story says that Jesus, knowing that he had been there a long time, asked him a question: “Do you want to be healed?”

“Does he want to be healed?” My heavens, he has been camping there next to a healing pool for . . . 38 years???

A silly question or . . . maybe not?

Think about it. What would it mean for a man who had been in such a state for 38 years to be healed?

I mean, imagine his life. If he were healed he’d suddenly have to fetch his own meals. There’d be a whole new set of expectations for him. He'd have to make a living somehow on his own.

Let me suggest that for Jesus to ask the question, "DO YOU WANT TO BE HEALED?" it is an act of empathy, of compassion.

You know, Jesus is often identified with the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Jesus is, in fact, often stamped with the authorship of that phrase, but you can find a number of versions of it cropping up in cultures around the globe going way back before him.

Let me just say, there are limits to the Golden Rule.

For my money, if Jesus is the author of any “rule” it would have to have been what is becoming known today as the Platinum Rule. That one goes this way – “Do unto others as they would be done by.” That is to say, don’t just do for people what *YOU* would like – take the time to find out what *they* might really want before you “help” them.

That truth is made perfectly clear in the story of the paralyzed man. Part of Jesus' integrity, I believe, lies in the fact that he goes beyond the Golden Rule.

He does not give people what we think they might want. He cares enough to ask them what they are willing or unwilling to accept. I think Jesus' integrity is, in fact, measured by his respectful behavior toward people of every station in life in regard to what he gives them.

I remember being given a lesson on this during the first pastoral call I made on my second day in my first church decades ago over in the Cully neighborhood of Portland. I was so green!

I asked the office manager who in the congregation might appreciate a pastoral visit and she said, "Dorothy," a woman who lived a block away from the church whose husband had passed away just a couple of months before. I'd met Dorothy the day before: the Sunday when I had led worship there for the first time. Dorothy was a very well dressed, proper woman, and a devoted church-goer. She had nursed her husband faithfully for a number of years before he died.

She answered her door and I immediately told her how sorry I was for her loss. Dorothy didn't skip a beat. She said, "Don't be sorry. I'm not. He was a skunk. Now I go dancing three nights a week. I'm finally having a good time in life."

Sometimes saying, "I'm sorry for your loss" is the right thing to say. And sometimes it's more complicated.

I remember hearing of a 70 year old man who had spent more than 30 years in prison; he was granted parole, but he wept and begged the parole board to rescind the order. The idea of being out on-his-own was not only NOT welcome, it filled him with terror. You might remember that the actor James Whitmore played just such a character in *The Shawshank Redemption*.

"Do you want to be healed?"

There is a hornet's nest hidden in that question. Let me tell you another reason why.

I remember a Presbyterian minister over in NE who went around anointing people with oil; people who had cancer. He and his elders would anoint them, pray over them, and then he would tell them they were healed but that they needed to “appropriate” their healings. That is, he would say, “If you have enough faith you will get well. If not, no healing for you.” This left many of them not only sick but also guilt ridden, thinking they didn’t have enough faith.

I knew some of these people. I had to try to clean up that minister’s messes sometimes. It was appalling, an outrage. Gross malpractice.

Now, that said, when it comes to disease, I believe there are, in fact, people, sometimes, who choose NOT to get well This is a tricky subject.

I know a woman, grown now, who when she was all of 6 was hospitalized for many months with Hepatitis A. She swears that she spent much longer in the hospital than she needed to and all because she willed herself NOT to get better.

She overheard her parents talking early in her illness about their desire to divorce, and she thought that as long as she was very sick they'd stay together.

“Do you want to be healed?” Not always.

We make all manner of choices in this world; and they are not always the best choices, heaven knows. Sometimes we make choices that are just sad. Think again of poor “Robot Boy” in the story I began with.

We’ve all heard of abused children who marry people very like their abusive parent. The choice may not be good, but it may seem, at first, to be comfortable. We, all of us, choose familiar demons at times.

“Do you want to be healed?”

The lame man in the gospel story does not answer Jesus' question directly. He is, in fact very defensive –

"I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is troubled; I'm lame. I can't get there. It's a catch 22."

Maybe he is really saying something like, "I have no one to put me in the water. I have . . . no one, and because I have . . . no one. I'm not all sure I want to get better."

I have come to believe that the possibility of wellness in sickness often has to do with who you have around you -- family or friends to help you hear what the doctors are saying -- family or friends to advocate for you, to make you more than just part of the hospital's census.

Sometimes that person can be a complete stranger -- an angel, of sorts. I remember a woman who lost both legs in the Boston bombing. Initially, she was just glad that they saved her life, but then, because they couldn't save her legs she began dwelling sadly on her loss, just as we all would.

And then a soldier who had lost both legs in Iraq came to visit her, came in on his two prostheses without even a limp. He said, "I was just where you are. Look at me now," he said and danced a little for her. "You can do this." And she said, that was the moment it all turned around for her. Pretty soon she was able to gather up the courage to say, "Maybe I can be as good or even better than I was."

And sometimes life provides *little* angels that really humble us on the way to giving us a needed lift. This story is told in the first person by Nancy Burke:

When I was very ill, I had to receive weekly intravenous treatments. This went on for almost two years. Somewhere in the middle I lost my courage. It is hard to say which collapsed first, my soul or my veins, but collapse they both did. One day the search for a healthy vein became too painful. I pushed the needle away and cried. The nurse asked to let her introduce me to a young girl of about ten who had lived with cancer all her life and who was also there receiving treatment that day. This child smiled at me and said, "You should have got one of these."

Lifting her T-shirt she showed me the hole that had been cut into her stomach so that she could receive her treatments through a permanent plastic port. Then she put her hand, small and soft, in mine and said

"You can take it." And I did. (Nancy Burke, Meditations For Health: Thoughts & Quotations On Healing & Wellness)

Do you want to be healed?

Healed. What, in the end, does that mean?

I remember seeing Magic Johnson on "60 Minutes" years ago. He was talking about his HIV. He said something interesting. He said, "I'm healed, but I'm not cured." That raised more questions than it answered. Then he said, "I know I'm going to be alright."

Fear of AIDS was not dominating his life; it was not the central issue determining who he was, who he is. Magic Johnson is, in fact, a more interesting person than he was before he found out he had HIV. He has more soul, more depth. He knows what is really important. That is the gift he got of getting in touch with his own mortality

I've quoted the Sufi poet, Rumi to you before:

*Don't turn your head; keep looking at the bandaged place.
That's where the light enters you.*

Do you want to be healed?

Illness can be so insidious. It can so take over one's outlook that everything else about oneself can be lost

This morning's reading from the gospel of *John* says that the lame man had "for 38 years been IN his sickness" (That's the literal Greek). He was swallowed by it.

We become tempted to believe that we are sick, and that's all – but we need not let that happen -- and often it takes an angel to talk us out of it. Someone to call us, like Jesus, to go beyond it.

I'll close with one more story of just such an angel. It's by Dawna Markova who tells her own story about her own special angel.

When I was in the hospital, the one person whose presence I welcomed was a woman who came to sweep the floors with a large push broom. She was the only one who didn't stick things in me, take things out, or ask stupid questions. For a few minutes each night, this immense Jamaican woman rested her broom against the wall and sank her body into the turquoise plastic chair in my room. All I heard was the sound of her breath in and out, in and out.

It was comforting in a strange and simple way. My own breathing calmed. Of the fifty or so people that made contact with me in any given day, she was the only one who wasn't trying to change me.

One night she reached out and put her hand on the top of my shoulder. I'm not usually comfortable with casual touch, but her hand felt so natural being there. It happened to be one of the few places in my body that didn't hurt. I could have sworn she was saying two words with each breath; one on the inhale, one on the exhale: "As. . . Is. . . As. . . Is. . ."

On her next visit, she looked at me. No evaluation, no trying to figure me out. She just looked and saw me. Then she said simply, "You're more than the sickness in that body." I was pretty doped up, so I wasn't sure I understood her; but my mind was just too thick to ask questions.

I kept mumbling those words to myself throughout the following day, "I'm more than the sickness in this body. I'm more than the suffering in this body." I remember her voice clearly. It was rich, deep, full, like maple syrup in the spring. I reached out for her hand. It was cool and dry. I knew she wouldn't let go.

She continued, "You're not the fear in that body. You're more than that fear. Float on it. Float above it. You're more than that pain." I began to breathe a little deeper, as I did when I wanted to float in a lake.

I remembered floating in Lake George when I was five, floating in the Atlantic Ocean at Coney Island when I was seven, floating in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Africa when I was twenty-eight. Without any instruction from me, this Jamaican guide had led me to a source of comfort that was wider and deeper than pain or fear.

It's been fifteen years since I've seen the woman with the broom. I've never been able to find her. No one could remember her name; but she touched my soul with her compassionate presence and her fingerprints are there still.

From No Enemies Within by Dawna Markova

What dogs you in life? What is unresolved for you; unresolved in a way that sometimes just hurts? What is keeping you from being healthy; really healthy?

Have you had this wound for a long time, maybe? A year? Ten years? Twenty? Thirty-eight?

Ask yourself the question, why so long? Ask yourself, "Do I want to be healed?"

It might be the most important question you will ever answer.

Amen