



**“DO YOU WANT TO BE WELL?”**  
**SCRIPTURE: PSALM 67; JOHN 5:1-9**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**May 26, 2019**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Psalm 67**

67:1 May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us,  
Selah 67:2 that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all  
nations. 67:3 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.  
67:4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth. Selah 67:5 Let the peoples praise you, O God; let  
all the peoples praise you. 67:6 The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has  
blessed us. 67:7 May God continue to bless us; let all the ends of the earth revere  
him.

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

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**John 5:1-9**

5:1 After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 5:2  
Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha,  
which has five porticoes. 5:3 In these lay many invalids--blind, lame, and paralyzed.  
5:5 One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 5:6 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?" 5:7 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." 5:8 Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your  
mat and walk." 5:9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and  
began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath.

The Word of the LORD.  
**Thanks be to God.**

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What does it mean to be well?

Does it mean being healthy? Does it mean being strong?

Is being well the same as being “well-off” as in financially comfortable?

Does it mean being successful?

Is being well about having no problems?

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For 38 years he had been ill—waiting for someone or something to cure him.

38 years sounds like a long time to be ill—but maybe we're not such strangers to that situation.

The last 38 years on the planet earth has seen the number of wild animals cut in half. And that loss is due to things like human consumption, habitat loss, climate change, and human exploitation.<sup>1</sup>

In the last 38 years, the United States has had the most extensive and negative impact on climate change than any country in the world.<sup>2</sup>

The truth is none of us are well—we, the earth, are not well.

Science confirms that we're currently experiencing the worst species die-off since the loss of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. John Platt puts it this way:

“Although extinction is a natural phenomenon, it occurs at a natural ‘background’ rate of about one to five species per year. Scientists estimate we're now losing species at up to 1,000 times the background rate, with literally dozens going extinct every day... as many as 30 to 50 percent of all species possibly heading toward extinction by mid-century.”<sup>3</sup>

The United Nations just released a powerful report confirming that this alarming increased rate of extinction is due to human-related causes. The report describes the sobering future that is unfolding:

“... [M]ore than 40 percent of the planet’s amphibian species are threatened with extinction, along with about a third of the shark family and a third of marine mammals... about 10 percent of insect species are at risk... Most species will drift away in caves, in the ocean, in the ground, or in the air, one by one, bit by bit, dying by a thousand papercuts... Then they’ll go extinct far away from human eyes... The numbers will soon start to stack up, and along the way they’ll also speed up, with ecosystems collapsing and extinctions happening faster and faster.”<sup>4</sup>

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Do you want to be made well?

This man has no idea who Jesus is. And yet, he takes a risk to trust Him. Stand up, Jesus says.

Jesus' healing method is not predictable—he doesn't touch the man, he doesn't diagnose his condition, he doesn't call out demons or give the man new medicine.

Jesus' healing pushes against societal convention. After all this healing is done on the Sabbath. And later, it is used against Jesus by the keepers of the status quo as one of his unforgiveable acts.

Jewish law stipulated that human need could override the Sabbath abstention from work (which included the work of healing) when discretion determined such an exception was warranted. So, one could argue that Jesus did have legal and moral license to heal on the Sabbath. But John's Gospel wants to be clear here—Jesus' healing on the Sabbath was a problem for the religious authorities.

We don't know what this man's illness was. We know that he had been afflicted and waiting at the pool for a long, long time.

Jesus tells him to leave that way of life, that familiar space and that familiar identity behind. You are no longer a person waiting to be made whole. You are a person who is ready to be well. And you are not going to get there by following the rules of social convention. And something will be asked of you in the process—somehow the man's relationship to his illness changes, somehow the way it impacts his daily life gets shifted.

Would you have the courage to try it, to stand up to whatever it is you need to stand up to?

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A few years ago I gave a lecture at Wake Forest Divinity School on embodiment theology.

At the question and answer period a student asked me, "What does all this mean for people who are not healed? This sounds all well and fine, but what about when people don't get healed, when their cancer is not cured, when their mental illness does not go away, when their chronic pain persists."

This is a good question, isn't it? And it begs a few questions—the first of which is what does it mean to be made well? What does it mean to be healed?

As a rape survivor I use to think being healed meant going back to who I was before I was assaulted and stalked. Being healed was restoration, being made whole again. Every time I would realize that I was never going back to that person, the person I was before I was raped, I felt like such a failure. I felt like healing would never be something I experienced. I was ashamed of that added failure, demoralized that I couldn't ever seem to just be done with it.

It took me a long time and a lot of dark nights of the soul to learn that healing is not going back to who I was. Healing is learning how to be at home with who I am now, rape survivor and all.

I learned that being well is not being whole. Being well involves grieving and it deploys the remarkable capacity our bodies have to regenerate, to adapt, and to slowly come alive in new and unexpected ways.

The man on the mat is all of us being asked if we are finally ready to believe that Jesus is talking to us.

Being well means standing up and saying “today my life changes.” Today I will stop understanding myself as helpless. Today I will stop waiting for other people to change. Today I will listen to the voice of God and not the voices that tell me that there is no way to heal.

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Our cultural moment reverberates with Jesus’ question: Do you want to be made well?

These days I hear a lot of lament about the divisions in our country. I hear a lot of anxiety, especially among white people, about the pain that is being expressed by people of color, indigenous people, women, people who live in differently-abled bodies, and others who have carried the weight of oppression in American society for so long. I hear tinges of despair among some who are troubled by all the bad news and contentious rhetoric of our political sphere. And I hear a lot of fear about what is happening to our planet.

But Jesus’ question pushes us past those predictable ways of refusing to acknowledge what really ails our world.

Division is not our disease—oppression is.

Bad news is not what ails us—abusive power is.

Impacted people telling us where and how it hurts is not what is harming us—the lies of white supremacy are killing us.

And the alarming news about the planet is not what we need to fear—complacency and the status quo are the enemy.

What does it mean to be well in a world where species are disappearing and the planet is languishing and greed continues to drown out any collective will to build a sustainable life for humanity on this planet?

It means we have not yet realized that it is our job to pick up our mats—it is our job to decide we are ready for a radical change in relationship to that which ails us.

I can't be well if you are not well. And we can't be well if the planet is not well.

Our plight is not one created by aberrant individuals, but by the social group, the culture, the mentalities that have formed our self-understanding, our habits of being, our expectations and our sense of what's virtuous and desirable, and our narrative of our nation.

Bryan Stevenson said when he spoke at UNCA last month that we must name who we are as a nation—we are a post-genocide country.

When we slaughtered and destroyed millions of indigenous people and demeaned their beliefs, their languages, their culture, and their families, we mocked the reverence they had for this planet, for this land. And we broke our relationship with this land, with all living things that make homeplace in this land.

When we commodified millions of black and brown bodied people through the violence of chattel slavery and all the oppressive systems it has spawned since to build the economic wealth of this country, we poisoned the moral capacity of our nation, and we ruptured our ability to be in right relationship with this land and with each other.

In short, our post genocide country is a carrier of the worst kind of self-destruction and wastefulness. We have laid waste to the dignity of human beings, we have laid waste to the sacred quality of the natural world, and we have told ourselves we can never have enough.

One study determined that it would take four planet earths just to sustain the consumption rates of the United States alone.

Do we want to be well?

The mats we pick up are a tapestry stitched together with our own experiences and wounds and the cultures and systems that have formed us.

And while we can never be whole—so much has been lost than can never be restored, Jesus is telling us there is a way to be healed.

Do we want to be well?

Jesus's invitation to us is not to just bide our time, but to see ourselves anew. In Christ our capacity for being well can change our lives and it can change the world.

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Sir Robert Watson, the chair of the UN body that issued the climate change report, said that, “it’s not too late to make a difference.” He says it won’t be easy; it will require a profound transformation in how human society functions.

“By transformative change, we mean a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values... [This will meet with] opposition from those with interests vested in the status quo.”<sup>5</sup>

Living differently is not out of reach. In fact, it is well within our capability. That is exactly what Jesus is telling us beside that healing pool—you have what you need to be well. But it takes seeing the truth about what ails us, it takes unlearning our delusion of helplessness, it takes being ready for something new and being ready to exert ourselves and move away from our familiar, from our settled ways of being and thinking and doing.

A lot can happen in 38 years. But scientists are saying we don’t really have 38 years to spare. In fact many say that by 2035, we will have reached a tipping point in climate change when things can no longer be altered by human effort. We’re already at a point where modest and sporadic efforts won’t change this warming trend. We need everyone on board; we need America—our government and our corporations and our culture, on board.

The man on the mat had lots of excuses for his situation—I was waiting for someone to stir the water, people kept jumping in front of me.

Do we want to be well? Are we more invested in excuses than we are in solutions that we can put into motion? Jesus is calling us to live into the power that we have to heal, to be made well.

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Being well is an invitation to a new way of life. Are we ready to be well?

Let us give ourselves to Jesus’ invitation with everything we’ve got.

Adrienne Rich’s poem from *Your Native Land, Your Life* is a good place to begin anew:

*The problem, unstated till now, is how  
to live in a damaged body  
in a world where pain is meant to be gagged  
uncured    ungrieved over    The problem is  
to connect, without hysteria, the pain*

*of any one's body with the pain of the body's world  
For it is the body's world  
they are trying to destroy forever  
The best world is the body's world  
filled with creatures      filled with dread  
misshapen so      yet the best we have  
our raft among the abstract worlds  
and how I longed to live on this earth  
walking her boundaries      never counting the cost<sup>6</sup>*

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/29/earth-lost-50-wildlife-in-40-years-wwf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/01/22/the-u-s-has-contributed-more-to-global-warming-than-any-other-country-heres-how-the-earth-will-get-its-revenge/?utm\\_term=.7f452b11c89e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2015/01/22/the-u-s-has-contributed-more-to-global-warming-than-any-other-country-heres-how-the-earth-will-get-its-revenge/?utm_term=.7f452b11c89e)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements\\_of\\_biodiversity/extinction\\_crisis/](https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/biodiversity/elements_of_biodiversity/extinction_crisis/)

<sup>4</sup> <https://therevelator.org/one-million-extinctions/>

<sup>5</sup> UN Climate article

<sup>6</sup> Adrienne Rich from *Your Native Land, Your Life*