

John 5:18-41  
Jesus: Fire and Mercy  
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6-1-14

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There is perhaps nothing more transformative than a perfectly placed question. You can redirect the life of another, setting them on another trajectory, when you ask the right question. Likewise, our lives can be radically altered when we have the courage to respond to the life-changers when they come: Are you alright? Can I help you with that? Is there anything I can do?

So today, we're going to tackle Matthew through John in roughly 23 minutes, how does that sound? As I was thinking about this impossible task this week, I found myself asking if there was something in Jesus' life that encapsulates his ministry, and revealed himself uniquely as Savior to you and me. Perhaps better than anyone in history, Jesus knew how to ask the right question.

Do you want to be made well?  
Who do the people say that I am?  
What is it that you seek?

You see, our lives get piled up with distractions and side-issues. When someone is able to cut through all the stuff, and put it to us straight, our response is unavoidable. Jesus asks the question that we all need to hear. Do you want to be made well?

Distrust, shame, addiction, these are some of the things that act as fire retardants to the fire of the Gospel. When they gather around us, it becomes near impossible for that consuming passion for Christ, that unshakable hope in God, that attentiveness to the Spirit to flourish.

So into this world of fire retardants breaks the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we hear it in this morning's story, one that takes place at a place called Bethesda—literally house of mercy, *beth—house* and *hesed – mercy or grace*. A man who has been sitting by the pool of shame and disgrace for 38 years, looking for mercy and grace, feeling trapped and helpless and hopeless that there is no fire that can break into his life. Into his life walks a stranger who simply asks a question. So simple, in fact, that you can almost hear the man laugh. “Do you want to be well?”

Of course this guy wants to be well; he's been sitting there for 38 years hoping for this. But so often we find ourselves stuck in our shells of brokenness, week after month after year after decade of what seems to be God's disregard and inability to change our life, it's easy to come up with excuse after excuse after excuse. This is what we hear: “Hey it's not my fault, I didn't have anyone to take me to the pool.” He never even answers Jesus' question, he just makes excuses.

But Jesus doesn't linger in the excuses. No, in fact, he blows right past them and simply says to the man, “Get up!” “Pick up your mat, your symbol of loss of mercy and grace,

pick it up,” and so he does. But then when he walks out, he’s confronted, “Hey, you’re doing work on the Sabbath.” “It’s not my fault, don’t blame me”—and here come the excuses again—“don’t blame me, it was that guy. Come to think of it, I don’t really know who he was, he just came by and told me to get up.”

Later, Jesus meets him again in the temple, and we don’t know if he’s there to worship or for approval and validation from the priests. You can see why he would be there for approval. After 38 years of feeling like a total reject, who wouldn’t want some validation? Jesus walks up to him again and says, “Hey, be careful that you don’t fall back into your old pattern, and in so doing sin.” And again, the man goes running up to the authorities and says, “I found him, it’s Jesus, he did it, he’s the one who made me do this.” Again, the man was healed in his body, but he wasn’t healed in his heart or in his spirit. Sometimes the hardest healing in human life is the healing that can’t be seen. It’s the healing of our disappointed human hearts, the healing of our sense of betrayal and loss, the healing of our sense of guilt or shame or unworthiness.

And immediately, the text tells us that a persecution arose against Jesus.

And so we pick up our scripture in John’s gospel, chapter five verses 19 through 29. And if you are able, out of respect and reverence for God’s Word, would you stand with me?

**So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.**

**“Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.**

Are there some pools you’ve sat beside this week? As we’ve sat there feeling undeserving, feeling unworthy... if God really did walk into our lives with this simple question, “Do you want to be made well?” would we even recognize it? The pool the man sat beside was surrounded by Bethesda, the house of mercy, the house of grace. This sanctuary is a house of grace, a house of mercy.

If a person walked into this room on a Sunday morning, or if they walked onto campus during the week and met one of us – myself, the office staff, the many of you who are here throughout the week – would they find it to be a house of mercy, a house of grace?

Jesus comes into our lives and asks each of you, each of us: “What do you really want?” Recently, I was having a time of quiet prayer and I felt the Lord speak to me through a question that came up in my reading of this text. I sensed Jesus asking me, “What do you want?” And I thought to myself, “Well, I’d like to feel your presence, or know your heart.” And Jesus said, “No really, what do you want?” And I gave some other answer of what I thought I wanted. And I could sense Jesus saying, “No, that’s not what you want. What do you *really* want?” And at that point I said to myself, “You know, I don’t know what I want.” And Jesus said, “You’re right, but I know, and I want to take you there.”

We worship the God who walks into our lives often unannounced, often unknown, and says to us, “What do you want? You want to be well? Or would you rather continue in your paralysis and shame?” And then he says to us while we’re still mulling over the question, “Get up! Get up from your indecision, and your paralysis, and your shame and your distrust, and your feeling of being unworthy and unwelcome and unacceptable, get up from the paralysis of body or your mind or your soul,” he says, “get up.”

Sometimes the healing of our bodies is an easier thing to deal with than the healing of our minds. Because we have the ability to hear things, words that are intended to heal and restore, and we can hide them in the recesses of our minds. Maybe what you need to hear this morning is not a question but a proclamation, a clarion that cuts through all the clutter and self-deceit and simply says, “You are safe in God’s arms of love.”

There’s another healing story similar to this that’s found in Acts chapter 3. It’s the healing that Peter and the disciples perform at Solomon’s Porch. Peter encounters a man who also has been lame from birth, a man who has struggled for years and years. He says to him, “I have no silver or gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk.” And the man did, and the man got up and jumped and danced with them and went to the temple. There, the people looked at them, and they said, “Don’t look at us, it’s not by our power, but it is by the power of Jesus that this guy was healed.”

The man in Bethesda was healed physically, but he was never healed socially or spiritually or relationally. This man in Solomon’s Porch was healed physically, but he was also healed spiritually, leaping for joy and praising God. He encountered the grace of God in the midst of our shame and our disgrace.

In the church where I grew up, there was a woman, whose name just happened to be named Grace, of course, and she had many remarkable ministries that she started. But one that stood out in particular was that Grace would often meet and befriend young women who were employed in the professional sex industry, and she would bring them to church. They would sit with her up in the front and would often go out to people’s homes for lunch after church. Many of these homes were in the wealthy suburbs of Minneapolis. And one of these women was sitting in the living room in Edina, a beautiful room, she’d

never been to one like this. And as she was sitting there, the 7 year old girl who lived there came into the room and climbed up onto her lap and began to touch her face and said, “Oh how beautiful you are.” The woman burst into tears and said, “I’ve been touched every which way, but this is the first time I’ve ever been touched by the hands of love.”

What do you want? Do you want to be made well? Do you want to see life burst forth from dead places? Listen to the question. Jesus came into a world that was so utterly confused that we don’t even recognize love when it bends down and says “get up!” Get up, leave that old life, get up, get up from the weight of those relationships that are toxic and killing your spirit, get up from your shame, get up from your sense of inadequacy, get up from your excuses, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth who himself got up after three days in the ground, get up!

That’s what it means to be the people of God, to receive this touch of love and compassion, to receive this healing embrace of mercy that replaces disgrace with grace, that replaces shame with mercy, that sets us free to go and do the same for others. Will this church be a Bethesda, a place of mercy and grace? And how? Maybe it begins with the recognition that we need to be people who ask good questions, too. Who have eyes and ears to see and hear beyond what a person is saying with their mouth, to what they long for with their heart. Will we be a Bethesda for Wabash, a house of mercy?

But who is this Jesus who does this? He is what the text says he is: equal to the father, does nothing of his own initiative, only does what the father is doing. Set free knowing that he is loved by the father. The source of life. The one who gives life, not life limited by circumstances, but life abounding and life abundant, one who doesn’t seek our approval, but gives us his. In John 17, Jesus says, “Father give to them as you’ve given to me, that they may be where I am, that my glory might be their glory, and my love might be in them.” God gives us God’s approval, God’s delight in us. We don’t approve of ourselves, God does, God gives us God’s approval. This is the kind of news that makes you want to leap and dance and shout for joy, because there is a release, there is a joy that penetrates you to your very core.

What’s keeping you from that? What excuses are you making? What is keeping you from experiencing the fire of his love? What’s keeping us from sharing that love with others? Jesus says, “Get up! I give you life irrepensible.” We’ve not come to a God who keeps things nice and neat, we’ve not come to a God who keeps things decent and in order; we’ve come to the Word who walks into our lives with fire and mercy and power.

The Holy Spirit is here in this room, making this place into a house of mercy and healing and love. And this table that is set before us is the table of healing, of wholeness, the table of the Kingdom of Heaven, AND it’s a table of rest. But when you answer the question that comes to each of you, the things that can’t come to the table...your excuses. So church, get up, come to this table of healing, come to this place of life, by any means necessary, come.