

Jesus and the Invalids

John 5:1-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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There is a festival in Jerusalem and Jesus is there for the party.

He makes his way through the Sheep Gate and strolls through the porticoes—these big impressive pillars with walkways through them—and comes some unimpressive people.

Invalids.

The blind, the lame, the paralyzed. The dirty and helpless, the smelly and the unsightly. The broken and discarded pieces of humanity.

One guy's been there for thirty-eight years. He's probably not the only one, but still. Thirty-eight years.

Jesus sees him. He knows his story. He knows all that this man has endured, all the ways in which his condition has alienated and ostracized him.

He knows the stigma attached to disease in the ancient world. He knows that "lame" is often interchangeable for "unclean" or "sinner."

He knows how this man has suffered, physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. He knows the ways in which his condition has burrowed deep into his psyche and become perhaps the defining feature of his existence.

He knows the extent to which this man's victimhood has become who he is, and all the ways in which he feels defeated, resigned, helpless, rejected.

Jesus knows all this and more. But he doesn't ask the man about any of this. He doesn't ask to hear the man's story. He doesn't condescendingly pity him or rail against the societal structures that keep men like this lying beside a pool for thirty-eight years.

Jesus asks one simple question: Do you want to be made well?

Jesus makes his way from the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem around 33 AD to Lethbridge, AB in 2019.

Jesus can do this because Jesus is alive and because Jesus shows up behind locked doors and along roads to Emmaus and over breakfast with confused disciples. And because Jesus is God.

He walks around our city streets to see what he will see.

He makes his way the hospital. Or the Extendicare facility. Or the dementia ward. He sees the sadness, the confusion, the losses piling up upon losses, the ways in which we institutionalize our most vulnerable people where they can receive the care that we can't give them... and where their presence isn't a nagging reminder of what might be coming for us. He sees the fear—theirs and ours. He sees the longing for wholeness or relief. Or release.

Or maybe Jesus wanders down the road to the jail. He sees the neglected and rejected kids, the hurt people who hurt people, the addicts and the misfits, the abused and the abusers, the victims of toxic systems of racism. The liars and the thieves, those looking for a warm bed and a hot meal in winter. The ones who will tell anyone who will listen that they didn't do it. The ones who will tell anyone who will listen exactly what they did.

Or maybe he makes his way to the safe injection site. He surveys the scene—the addicted, the homeless, more victims of racism, the criminals, the mentally ill, the predators and the prey, the broken and discarded pieces of humanity who are far easier to blame than to try to understand.

Or maybe Jesus walks into the mall and sees people consuming and distracting themselves into spiritual oblivion. He sees the expensive gadgets and endless entertainment options. He sees all the ways in people seek to escape. He sees people living indulgently, carelessly, recklessly, thoughtlessly. He sees our addiction to technology and all the ways we have of self-medicating to relieve the boredom of lives in search of meaning.

Or maybe Jesus finds his way to a gym and sees people frantically pummeling their bodies into submission because they're trying to measure up to some impossible standard of what health and strength and beauty look like. Or because they're afraid of death.

Or maybe Jesus makes his way into a library, or a coffee shop, or a pub, or a park bench on a lovely spring day, and he listens in on anxious conversations about the future. Our own individual futures. The future of our kids, the church, the culture, the planet. We so desperately long for futures of goodness, hope and meaning, but we're not always sure how to get from here to there.

Or maybe Jesus shows up at an ordinary middle-class home with ordinary people just trying to make their way in the world. Maybe he sees an untended marriage or estranged kids or lonely people, or people afraid of getting older, or people coping with unexpected illness, or people wondering if there shouldn't be more to life than this.

Maybe he sees people whose faith, hope, and love have dwindled down into not much at all, people who have settled, who are just putting in time, drifting aimlessly instead of living creatively and purposefully.

Wherever Jesus goes, he sees people in pain and in need. He knows the story behind the story. He knows the story behind every story.

He knows all of our afflictions, all the things that hurt and frighten us. He knows the ways in which we have been victimized, the ways in which our suffering is not our fault. He knows the ways in which we are sometimes the instruments of our own misfortune. He knows the things we have done and left undone.

Jesus could sit patiently and listen to our version of the story. And he might, another time.

But today, he just has one question. Do you want to be made well?

That's it. It's not a question of explanation or analysis or justification or blame. It's a question of desire.

What do you *want*?

Earlier when our passage was read, there was a harsh word used in John 5:4.

Invalids.

This is how the NRSV puts it. The NIV softens it a bit to "disabled people." The KJV hardens it: "impotent folk, blind, halt, withered."

I chose the NRSV in part because it's provocative. We hear invalid as *invalid*, as in "not valid," "not legitimate," or "not admissible." It sounds like such a harsh thing to say about a human being!

How could John describe *real* people like this, especially those who are suffering?!

If you were to bump into me on the way to the hospital and ask what I was doing, I responded, "Oh, I'm going to visit one of our invalids, you'd probably be horrified. It might come up at the next congregational meeting. ☺"

But the word is technically precise. It comes from the mid 16th century and is taken from Latin *invalidus*: *in*—‘not’—and *Validus*—‘strong.’

In-valid. Not strong.

So, Jesus notices the not strong ones. Then and now.

And as I hope my imaginative tour with Jesus through our city showed, there are many ways to be “not strong.”

Some “not strongness” is obvious—people who are literally sick, weak, disabled, old.

Other “not strongness” is less obvious.

Those who are mourning the loss of a loved one and who wonder if the grief will crush them. Those who suffer with depression and anxiety. Those who are desperately lonely.

Those who have burned bridges behind them and are now finding it difficult to cross back.

Those who are weary of the frantic treadmill of modern life and wonder if they’ll ever be able to step off.

Those who are experiencing compassion fatigue—those for whom the need around seems almost endless and who worry that they’ve drawn from the well one too many times.

Those who worry that they’re not good enough, smart enough, strong enough, creative enough to make the changes that are necessary to live the lives they want to and feel called to.

Those whose faith is withering on the vine—who can’t seem to believe the way they once did, who don’t really see the relevance of worship, who struggle to pray.

There are *all kinds* of ways to be “not strong.”

And, no matter what our “not strongness” looks like, Jesus’ disposition toward us is the same.

He sees us. He knows the story behind the story. He has compassion on us, and he loves us.

And he insists upon the same uncomfortable question that he asked the man beside the pool: “Do you want to be made well?”

Do you actually *want* wellness and wholeness?

It’s a question that offends and unsettles us, perhaps. *How can you ask such a thing, Jesus? Thirty-eight years by the pool?! Twenty years of grief? Ten years of fighting this illness?! Five years*

in the fog of this depression?! Of course I want to be well!

But Jesus asks it anyway. He knows that behind what we say about our suffering, there are often other stories at work.

Again, Debie Thomas puts it so well (it seems like I'm quoting her every week lately!):

For me, the question stings because I know exactly what it's like to say I want out, to say I want freedom, to say I want healing—and not quite mean it. I know what it's like to cling to brokenness because it's familiar. I know what it's like to make victimhood my identity. I know what it's like to benefit from the very things that cause me harm. I know what it's like to sink into self-pity. I know what it's like to assume that everyone else has access to a magic pill I'll never get my hands on. I know what it's like to decide that I'm doomed to sit at the very edge of healing for the rest of my life, and never attain it.

For me, the question stings because the very idea that God cares about what I want—that he's curious about my desires, that he wants me to recognize and articulate them—blows me away.¹

Me, too.

Now, I want to be clear about what I'm not saying. I am not saying that wanting is a simple prerequisite for healing—that if we just *want* to be well, Jesus will summon us to life in precisely the same way he did for the man in our story this morning.

There were presumably all kinds of other “invalids” lying around that day that Jesus did *not* heal. There were and are many people who had physical afflictions that remained with them until their dying day.

Suffering is part of life. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, these stories of healing function like foretastes of the kingdom—resurrections, as I called them—not templates for what all people at all times should expect.

Sometimes, what it means to be “made well” is to be given the strength to suffer well, in imitation of Jesus, who the Bible also says “was made perfect through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10).

¹ https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2225-the-question-that-hurts?fbclid=IwAR0a2m_eq4FiYPTkqmK1ILnoCl7b4yoqf6Oubv83PUOcqrIF9LJDKahIHTs

Sometimes, what it means to “be made well” is to come to understand the deep truth of Christian faith that Paul spoke of in 2 Corinthians 12:

I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Jesus does not work like a formula. We know this.

But our wanting is important.

Without the desire for wellness we will not take a step, whether it’s to actual physical healing, or to lightening the burden of another, or to shedding the victimhood that we have grown accustomed to, or to learning how to suffer well.

All of us need to hear that to be human is to be more than the biological or sociological hand that we have been dealt.

No matter what our context, no matter what our affliction, no matter what narrative we might have chosen to make sense of our suffering, Jesus stubbornly insists upon paying us the compliment of telling us to take a step toward wholeness, to make a choice, to say what we want.

Jesus made one final stop on his walk through our city. It was Sunday morning, so Jesus decided to go to church.

Maybe it was our church. Or maybe Jesus decided to visit the Anglicans... or the Lutherans... or the evangelicals... or the Catholics.

And what did Jesus see when he showed up at church? Did he see religious business as usual? Did he see shiny buildings and well-dressed people? Did he see clever sermons, polished music, and bustling programs?

Did he see religious professionals who were more concerned with correct procedures and proper interpretations, who, like the Jewish religious leaders of his day, seemed to think that their job was to police and promote the ways in which God was allowed to work in the world, who would rather silence the Healer than celebrate the healing?

Or...

Did he see communities that had room for invalids? For the “not strong” ones? Did he see people who were trying to understand the story behind the ugly and painful stories, people who had

determinedly set their course to love the lost and the least.

Did he see people who paid their neighbours the compliment of refusing to see them as nothing but victims of their pain?

Did he see people who *knew* that no matter who they were or what they'd endured or what they were presently going through, **that there are forms of strength available to each one of us in every situation through the power and the example of the risen Christ?**

Did Jesus see a community who knew that they were all, in fact, invalids? That they were all "not strong."

Did he see a people who had covenanted to walk together, to support each other, to help one another get to the source of their healing?

Did he see people who knew that the church was not a museum for the righteous but a hospital for the sick?

One thing we know about Jesus, then and now. He sees. He knows. And he offers life to all who will come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

