

“Do You Want to Be Made Well?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
May 1, 2016

John 5: 1-9

Have you noticed how us human beings are really good at saying one thing, but then our actions just don't back up what's behind our words? I'm completely guilty of this. Each morning, I look at myself in the mirror and I say, “Man, I need to lose some weight.” I may say that to my family and friends, as well. But do my actions back up what I am saying? Not at all – not when I chose to lay on the couch and watch TV instead of going for a walk; not when I chose to snack on something salty or sweet, instead of eating something healthy. How can anyone believe me when my actions don't align with what I am saying?

Now, I'm not the only one who does this, to be sure. I believe we become frustrated with politicians and public figures when we see them saying one thing, and then doing quite the opposite. We struggle when family and friends say they want to get out of the vicious cycles of unhealthy behavior, and yet we are constantly bailing them out of the bad decisions they keep making. And we can feel shame and remorse when we look at ourselves in the mirror, and truly recognize how hypocritical and phony we have been with our loved ones, ourselves, and our God.

As I read this story from John today, I could not help but notice how the man's words and actions seem to contradict one another, and that Jesus calls him on it. We read that the man had been ill for thirty-eight years, and would sit at this pool in Jerusalem with the other invalids. Jesus comes up to him and asks him point-blank: “Do you want to be made well?”

Did you notice the man's response? You'd think after 38 years, the man's first reaction would be, “Yes! Please! Make me well!” Instead, the man says, “Sir, no one can get me down to the pool, and even if I am able to make my way down to the pool, others get in line ahead of me.” In other words, he doesn't say yes, but he gives Jesus an excuse why he's not yet well! Does he not believe Jesus could make him well? Does he not want to be made well, and so he just makes up an excuse? Why wouldn't you want to be healed of an illness you've had for 38 years?

Kyle Childress addresses this discrepancy: *And Jesus asks this man lying over to one side, “Do you want to be made whole?”*

“No thanks, I think I'll just stay here on my pallet and wait for the waters to ripple. I've been here 38 years and I know what to expect and I know all of the other people nearby. True, I'm probably not going to get better, but – you know – I've gotten used to being here, so thanks all the same, Jesus but I'll just lie here.”

Do we fear the cure more than the illness? Bill Coffin said that if it is hell to be guilty, it's certainly scarier to be responsible – response-able – able to respond to God's call, able to respond to the word and love of Jesus. When we

cease being a victim – “I can’t get to the water Jesus; there’s always someone else who gets there first” – and start being responsible, then our legs are strong enough for us to walk beside others who are in pain and need help. Our arms are empowered to embrace our enemies and the outcasts. We no longer make excuses; instead we walk forward to new life in Jesus Christ and go to work serving, healing, hoping, and living a life of joy and fullness.

Charles Campbell, in his outstanding book, *“The Word Before the Powers,”* wonders that if one of the ways the Principalities and Powers, the Systems of Domination, keep us under their thumb is by keeping us busy, tired, and diverted. We become numbed to the call of Jesus Christ to serve God and serve the hurting because we don’t have time. We come home after work and collapse in front of the TV until it is time to go to bed and repeat the process all over again. Weekends are when we want to get out of town or do something else. So we live life to the minimum. And we say we want change when we actually want to remain the same – but we want to feel better about it.

We know that to get up and follow Jesus will involve us in people’s lives in ways we’re not sure we want, because to be whole means to be re-membered, re-connected with God and with God’s people and God’s creation. No more isolation. No more living my own private life where no one bothers me. To be whole means to get off of the couch and get involved. It means to work our tails off, often doing behind the scenes work that is tedious and overlooked. We know all of that, so maybe our couches and our pallets don’t look so bad.

No wonder so many churches are still on the pallet. No wonder so many of us are reticent about being made whole. And no wonder we have neither the courage nor the will nor the energy to say, “No!” to the many ways the Powers grind us all down. No wonder we are reluctant to say “Yes!” to Jesus Christ and the embodiment of his Abundant Life (*“Courage to Be Whole,”* May 5, 2010, ekklesiaproject.blogspot.com/2010/05/courage-to-be-whole.html).

It is so easy to fall into patterns of self-pity that we can fail to hear and see how God may be yearning for us to be made whole. It is so much more comfortable to stay on our pallets and bemoan our condition, rather than step out of our isolation and become re-connected with God and our neighbor. It is painful to look back on how such self-pity can harm our most important relationships: our family, our brothers and sisters in Christ, our God. It is in those moments that we pray for forgiveness and reconciliation where we have wronged others, so that our treasured relationships might be made whole in Christ’s love.

But this tendency to remain on the pallet applies also to the church. We will say one thing, but our actions do not back up our words. We say we want to grow the church, that we want more people to come and be a part of our community, that we want to see new programs and opportunities for people of all ages to grow spiritually in this place.

Yet when it’s time to serve in leadership or assist with an event, we just stay on our pallet. When it’s time to invite someone new to church, so that we might grow in numbers, we make an excuse that it’s too hard, it’s too much, that we simply aren’t wired to be outgoing like that. When it’s time to invest in our

programming or staff or facility to broaden our budget for ministry, we just keep giving the same amount of money – if any at all – believing someone else will take care of it.

Here's the thing, though. This story is not just about the sick man with all the excuses. It is also about the one who offers healing and wholeness. It is also about the one who breaks through the passiveness, the complacency, and says to the man, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." God is not interested in our excuses. God is not interested in our comfort. God is interested in making us whole, making us well, making us disciples of his Son.

God is patient – to a point! God will let us have our little pity party for a minute. But then it's time to experience transformation. Then it's time to lay aside our excuses. Then it's time to stand up, take up our mat, and walk a life of discipleship that is not filled with fear, but is filled with faith.

I want you to take note of a date on the calendar. It is Saturday, August 27. That is the day that we are going to step out in faith at John Knox in a new and different way. Instead of having our annual church picnic for just ourselves, the Board of Deacons is inviting us to step out and be engaged with our community. The picnic this year will be for our neighbors, it will include a tent on the field beside the church, and will truly be a visible desire on our part to be an Open, Caring, Community, to this neighborhood in which we are located.

I have heard it said in meetings, in hallway discussions, in one-on-one conversations that we want to be more connected to our community, that we want to invite more people into the life of our church. Those words are great to hear. Now it's time to back up those words with actions. Now it's time to not make excuses. Now it's time to get up off our mats and walk.

This community picnic will not succeed with only the Deacons' leadership. It must be a church-wide effort. It must be all of us being willing to participate and engage and interact with our community. For all of our talk about wanting to welcome new people and grow the church, it's now time to show that we mean what we say.

You're invited to a planning meeting on Tuesday, May 17, at 6:30 p.m. You're invited to participate in the picnic on Saturday, August 27, from 12-4 p.m. You're invited to be made well, to be made whole. Jesus is standing before you, extending his hand, and saying, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." How will you respond? Will we live life to the minimum? Or will we live life in faith?

May God be with each of us as we seek to answer the master's call. Thanks be to God. Amen.