

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Pray, But Move Your Feet!**

*When Jesus saw a man lying there, and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up...” – John 5:1-9*

A great preacher (William Sloane Coffin) once observed how much of the earth and sky can be reflected in so humble a body of water as a puddle. In the same way, he said, it is amazing how much of heaven and earth can be illuminated by small, biblical stories, like the one we just heard.

The legend about the pool of Bethesda was that periodically the water would mysteriously be stirred up, by an angel they thought, and the first person into the pool would be healed. And so it attracted many invalids who hoped to be healed. One man had been by the pool for thirty-eight years, hoping to get into the water. Jesus comes along and asks him, “do you want to be healed?” It seems like a rude question, if you think about it. I mean, obviously, the man has been there for 38 years. Of course he wants to be healed. Or does he? Has he grown comfortable with his life the way it is? Has he become so used to being an invalid that he no longer has any confidence that he could function if his life were to change? Has he made his peace and given up hope and is content to live out his days begging for a living?

It is something we all do to some extent. We make our peace with the unfulfilling marriage, the unrewarding job, the addiction, the routine, the familiar, because it is familiar. And when something or someone comes along and asks “Do you want things to be different?” “Do you want to be made well?” – Well, do we? Even if we could be guaranteed that what we had always longed for would happen, do we really want it? If Jesus came to you, at the point of your deepest longing, and asked, “do you want to be made well?” how would you answer? Would you want to rock the boat? To leave the job and the paycheck and try something new? To reach across the fence to the neighbour that you haven’t spoken to in years? To shake up the uneasy truce with your spouse? To break the pattern that keeps you estranged from the parent, sibling or child? To give up the excuse that has kept you from making more of your life?

I know people who have worked in terrible work environments for years because they were too afraid to try something new. I know people who have put up with difficult family situations because they weren't sure what life would be like if they stirred the waters. I know people who have grown used to being dependent on caregivers, alcohol, drugs and literally don't know how they would live without them.

Thirty-eight years is about the same length of time that the United Church and the World Council of Churches have been doing education and advocacy on issues of climate change, give or take a few years. We have been going to that particular pool for a very long time, trying to convince governments and electorates and taxpayers that their crippled relationship with the climate can change. We keep asking, "Do you want to be made well? Do you want to avoid climate catastrophe?"

It is easy in such situations to evade responsibility. That is what the invalid by the pool does when Jesus approaches him: "I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up. Someone always gets there in front of me." How often have you heard a variation on that line? "I'm stuck. There's nothing I can do. It's not my fault." I hear the same excuses from Albertans who say, "there is nothing we can do. We contribute such a small percentage of the world's greenhouse gases." That is an excuse, an evasion of responsibility, rather than a reason for inaction.

Jesus says to the man, and to you and to me: "Get up! Stand up! Take up your mat and walk!" Stop making excuses and stand on your own two feet. Yes, change is difficult. Change can be terrifying, but that is no reason to cower on the mat of our own complacency. Get up! Sometimes it doesn't matter what you change. You just start making changes and see what happens. You take a single step, and then another. There is an African saying: "pray, but move your feet!"

So maybe this story isn't primarily about a physical cure long ago, in a far away land. Maybe it is about Jesus reaching out to you and to me, offering us healing from our own complacency with a life that is less than what we were made for. Maybe it is about Jesus challenging us to rise up from the stiflingly familiar and to pick up the mat of our fear and to do what we need to do to claim the abundant life God wants for us. Maybe. The question remains: "Do you want to be made well? Do you really want to be made well?" If so, Jesus offers you healing, but you have to stand up, pick up the mat on which you have become comfortable, and move your feet. Amen!