

The Ungrateful Invalid - August 18, 2019

John 5:2-16

Imagine you're a young man, quite handsome, quite the social player. You happen to meet a woman about ten years older than you at a party. She picks you out of the crowd, dances with you and has a few drinks. She asks for your phone number. You'd never seen her before but some of your friends tell you that she is the owner of a well-known hi-tech company and is worth millions, if not billions. Well, things roll along, you get a call from her leading to a date. A few dates more and you see yourself with her online. "Silicon Valley boss has new boy toy." Funny, you'd never thought of yourself as boy toy before. But the parties continue, the dates continue, etc., etc. and just like that, you're married. Suddenly you're in a nice house with an ocean view. You've got a clothing allowance of \$10,000 a month and can invite your buddies over anytime. Sure, she only drops in once a week or so, but life is good. Of course, you see the social media posts of your wife going to concerts and big events escorted by other guys, but she keeps telling you that you're the only one for her. Of course, the clause in your prenuptial agreement stating you would say nothing about your relationship to the media keeps you enjoying the nice life you're used to. Occasionally, something in the back of your head says, there's something wrong here. But, you do nothing. Why change?

You might imagine that you're an attorney for a car company, responsible for defending the company from lawsuits about defective cars. You're quite successful at your job. You've saved your company millions in damages and you're paid very well. Of course, you don't drive your company's cars, but your nephew does. One day he gets in an accident involving a faulty brake system that you successfully proved in court was totally safe. Something in the back of your head says, poor kid, hope he feels better. But the house, the exotic vacations, and the private jets are calling, so you send him a get-well card with \$1000 dollars inside and move on. Why change?

There was a certain man living a long time ago who said he had a problem. He said he couldn't move. The problem started when he was a child and his family made arrangements for him to be carried every day to a certain pool in the city of Jerusalem. It was said that the pool had healing powers and that if you touched the water at the right time, you could be cured. Every day, someone would take him to the pool. Every night, someone would bring him home. Along the way, he was fed, washed, and cleaned.

Over time, the boy became a man and the routine continued. For thirty-eight years, he was taken to the pool and came home again. Over and over again. Hey, it was a living. He was fed, he was taken care of, he didn't have to do anything but lay by the pool. Why change?

Now, this man discovered accidentally, a terrible secret about himself. One day, at home and all alone, he needed to eat. His hunger became terrible. He forced himself out of bed and discovered

to his surprise and horror that he could walk. Suddenly, the man faced an awful choice: he either tell his family that he could walk and actually start helping support them or he could continue to pretend to be paralyzed and continue to get carted back and forth to the pool every day. Something in the back of his head said, I really should start helping my family, but, he also said, “I’ve got a decent life, why change?”

This indeed may have been the situation that Sabbath Day in Jerusalem at the Pool they called Bethesda. The situation that Jesus encountered when he stepped up to the man and asked him the simple question, “Do you want to be made well?”

Now I could be completely wrong here. I believe that Jesus Christ, Son of God, was and is fully capable of curing diseases, bring dead people to life, and feeding thousands in ways that seem to defy all natural laws. But I also believe that Jesus was an outstanding observer of humanity. I believe Jesus knows us right now, for what we have been and for who we are right now. Jesus knows all about you — and absolutely, positively loves you right now. That’s amazing good news!

Jesus not only knows what we have been and who we are right now, Jesus also knows what we can be. Jesus knows the many gifts we have been given. Jesus knows the potential we have inside ourselves. Jesus knows that often, too often, we make excuses for not being the people and the organizations and even nations he knows we can be.

That, friends, is precisely the situation Jesus found when he confronted the man at the pool when he asked if he wanted to be healed.

Now most of us, I think, were surprised by the man’s answer. He didn’t say YES! I mean if you or I were stuck at that pool for 38 years, wouldn’t we have told Jesus, “YES I WANT TO BE HEALED!!!!”

But all the man could offer was an excuse: “There is no one to put me in the water.” You know, if this man was clever enough to arrange for transport down and back from the pool every day, he could have arranged for someone to be nearby to put him in the water when the time came.

The fact is that that man most emphatically did NOT want to be healed. The last thing he wanted was to go into that pool. The last thing he needed was a stranger telling him to stand up and walk.

Yet, that is exactly what Jesus did. Jesus knew this man, just like he knows us. Jesus knew this man’s secret, just like he knows our secrets. And yes, Jesus knew the potential in this man to help his family and live a fuller life. So Jesus, despite what that man wanted, Jesus stuck out his hand and grasped the man and said, “Stand up and walk!”

Oh boy, what a disaster! Jesus saw through the man — a man without faith, a man without a plan, a man with absolutely no desire to change his life one bit — and raised him up to a brand new world. Terrible! Terrible!

All of the sudden, this man's old life was gone. His nice, easy, comfortable existence had been wrecked by this Jesus guy. Recall the scripture: did the man once, even once, say thank you? Did the man once, even once, ask Jesus who he was? I mean if a total stranger came up to me and helped me in an unexpected way, I'm going to say thanks. I'm going to want to know his or her name. I'm going to want to try to repay him or her for their kindness.

But this man was angry. He did not bother to learn Jesus' name. When he went to the Temple on the Sabbath, walking around, he was immediately confronted by the authorities. "Who healed you, it's against the law to heal on the Sabbath!" "Hey," the man said, "I didn't ask for this, look over there, he did it to me!" Of course, the man was pointing to Jesus. Again no gratitude, no joy, no appreciation for what happened to him —just resentment that his well-ordered life was over and he now had to change.

But friends, seriously, aren't we all a bit like this man? I'll go farther, aren't we a lot like this man? Don't we know many people who are like this man, people who are capable of being and doing much, much more, but choose to lock themselves in a prison of sameness just because it's easy.

Aren't some of us, or even all of us, members of organizations, or residents of a community, or citizens of a nation, who actively resent being told to change. Don't we, in fact, hate to look in a mirror of potential and see what we can be—even when it is better for us? Yes, yes we do!

Don't we all have something in common with the husband of the corporate executive, the lawyer defending shoddy products, the man lying in front of his pool forever? Yes, we all know, deep in our heart of hearts, that we can be better. We know that the bar can and should be set higher for us, that we are sorry for not only the things we have done, but also the things we could have done and still can do with our minds, bodies, and spirits.

And that friends, is where each and every one of us finds ourselves this Sunday at this place called Collingswood Presbyterian Church.

Now the easy thing to say to wrap up this sermon would be urge you to approach your family, friends, and coworkers and ask them directly how you can be better. After all, these are the people who see you most often. They know how you act, think, and react. Wouldn't they be a great resource to help you get your act together?

Well, possibly, but probably not. Let us not pretend we are very different from the man at the pool. Deep in our hearts, we are satisfied with the way things are—at least we are satisfied enough to

not want to risk changing anything or upsetting how things are. Like the man at the pool we are set in our ways and can get more than a bit angry if someone tells us differently.

After all, if you were to ask your partner for a candid evaluation, would they give it to you? It's much easier for them to say, "You're fine the way you are!" At the same time, their opinion or judgement of you might not be totally objective. The criticisms or suggestions they offer may be accurate or may be driven by their own fears and anger. How to tell? Would you listen, anyway?

Well, in dealing with human beings we often cannot listen, even when they are telling the truth. Friends, two things have to happen before we can in fact become the people God wants us to be. First we have to want it: want it for ourselves, want it for our families, want it for the organizations we are part of, want it for our nation, want it for our world. As every 12-step program tells us, change cannot truly begin unless and until we accept that we have to change.

But then, once we accept that we have to change, or our organization has to change, or our nation has to change, we have to actively consult the source, the only source, of all meaningful change in life and that is Jesus Christ.

On his own, Jesus decided that the man at the pool had to change. Jesus took the initiative. The man did not ask for it and certainly did not want it. For some of us in this room, Jesus will also take the initiative to change us. The question is will we recognize Jesus working in our lives, trying to change us. Now is where people, books, nature, and even strange voices come into play as Jesus sends a message of change to us. If we're not ready, we probably won't listen. Even if we are ready to change, we may not like the message and resist it as much as we can.

At the same time, we can take the initiative and pray, meditate, read, and listen. We can ask to be changed, touched, and healed. Again, when we ask for Jesus to change us, we might be surprised at what God wants us to do. Scripture is full of stories from Abram to Paul of people God changed. Their lives were different. I think they'd say their lives were better afterward. But when we are in Christ, as each week we say we are, our old lives will pass away and a new, better, sometimes unimaginable life will be the result.

Change—for us, for this church, for our nation, and for our world—will happen. The question we each need to answer is this: Will we accept God's help and enter the new world God has in store for us or will we be an ungrateful invalid like the man at the pool. Your choice.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.