

THE RELUCTANT BENEFICIARY

This is the most startling of all the healing stories in the New Testament. It is hard to fully express my delight in this story when I am thinking of its application to others – and my dismay when I am thinking of its application to me. Here is a man who did not ask to be healed, who did not want to be healed, who had no faith except faith in reverse (fear). Yet he was healed anyway. And he deeply resented it.

It is right for us to take this or that story from the New Testament, ponder it for itself and for its own merit, and glean from it what we need for our own lives. But there is also balance in the Scriptures. One story reveals a certain perspective, and another shows us the other side of that same truth. The Rich Young Ruler reminds us that we must be ready to lose all earthly wealth for the Kingdom; the Parable of the Pounds reminds us that we must be responsible and productive for the Kingdom. There are many teachings and stories to remind us about compassion, forgiveness, second chances, and how we should be ready and willing to help others. But here also is a story which proclaims that Jesus was no friend to freeloaders. He was advocating a life where we would be ready and willing to help others. He was *not* advocating a life where we would be ready and willing to have others support and take care of us for any longer than was absolutely necessary. (Sometimes it's Christmas; sometimes it's Labor Day. As it says in Second Thessalonians: "*If any one will not work, let him not eat.*" (3:10) This was later interpreted to mean: If anyone will not work for the Kingdom, let them not participate in the communion meal.)

Jesus comes upon this guy who has been surviving for thirty-eight years with his hand out, taking his living from the kindness of others. It is a very humorous story. It is also somewhat ugly, and also sad. In essence, Jesus takes away this man's beggar's role – He heals him in public and forces him, if you will, to go back to work. After thirty-eight years, that is going to be very difficult indeed. Nevertheless, the story asks us: How would we like it if Jesus looked at us and said, "You're a goof-off, a leech, a freeloader. Get back to work. Get productive."

Some of you have been through this story carefully. Some of you perhaps not. A quick summation of the action so that nobody will wonder what we are talking about: Verse 6 says Jesus knew that the beggar had been there a long time and asks him, "Do you *want* to be

healed?” That is the first hint that all is not as it appears. Verse 7, the man ducks the question and comes up with whining and complaining and “Nobody cares about me” and “Life is so unfair.” Verse 8, Jesus commands the healing. Verse 11, the man is challenged for carrying his pallet (doing work) on the Sabbath. The setting of the story makes it pretty clear that he was parading his pallet around the temple area on the Sabbath, knowing it would draw adverse attention; when it comes, he instantly blames it on Jesus. Verse 13 tells us he did not even know who Jesus was – he had not bothered to say one word of thanks or even find out the name of his benefactor. Verse 15, Jesus comes looking for the beggar to try one more time to get through to him. But the man, learning Jesus’ name, goes instantly to the authorities in the hope of getting Jesus into trouble – and he does.

I have ruined the storyteller’s art in order to make sure the plot is clear. That is because after talking about this passage, invariably there are people who accuse me of putting a new twist onto the story. No, I am not being creative. There is abundant evidence within the text itself for presenting it this way. Some people always want it to come out that Jesus was really nice and everybody loved Him for it. I’m sorry, but that is not how this story goes. Now we can come back to the text a little slower, and hopefully savor it a little.

Our story begins in the northeast corner of Jerusalem. Jesus has come to celebrate one of the Jewish festivals. Just to the north of the temple square is the Sheep Gate. In former years, this was the gate through which the sheep were brought into the temple area – hence, the name. Sounds pretty logical. We do not always think about such details, but if the temple was where sacrifices were constantly going on, what about the process of getting all the sheep to the altar? And near the Sheep Gate was a spring-fed pool where, in former times, the sheep were washed in preparation for their sacred purpose.

In Jesus’ time, this pool had turned into a healing shrine. They had built a building of five porticoes (porches, colonnades) there. *Bethesda* (*Bethsaida, Bethzatha*) means “house of grace” or “house of kindness.” We do not know, but we can imagine how the pool evolved from a place of such washing into a healing shrine. We do not know what caused the waters to “stir.” But people believed it was an angel, and that the first person into the pool after the waters moved would be healed. Many would be healed anyway by the waters of the sacred place, but if you

were the first one in after the angel stirred the waters, it was supposed to be a sure thing. So people believed. We are always longing and hoping to find such a magic thing or place – some break in reality as we know it – something that does not work by any of the patterns or rules we understand. A miracle is a blessing you get without having to work for it – without having to change your life like it needs to be changed. I would like to be in really good shape but I hate to exercise, so I pray for a miracle.

While we are into side comments, it is interesting to some of us when the Bible turns out to be more accurate than we expected. The Gospel of John, as you know, was written twenty or thirty years after the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Many have therefore assumed that there is no dependable historic or factual information in John – that its value is merely spiritual and theological. So the five porches in this story were thought to be John's symbolism, probably connected to some numerical significance for healing. There was, after all, no evidence that such a structure had ever existed, nor did it seem likely that one *would* exist in that area of the temple square. But in the mid-1980s, some archeologists excavating in the area – about forty feet below the present-day level of Jerusalem – unearthed a building with five arches, right where it was supposed to be. You can see it if you go to Jerusalem today. Maybe John was telling a real story after all.

Anyway, Jesus comes to this place of five porticoes and meets a man who has been hanging around there for thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight years was the traditional length of time a normal person was said to spend at their trade. This man had been at Bethesda all during what should have been the productive years of his life. We need to let that sink in a little bit. This is really sad. Life is not supposed to be this way. Not only is it sad for the man, but the community has been deprived of everything he might have been able to accomplish and contribute. Not only that, but during all these years, the community has somehow had to come up with extra resources to take care of him. Christians are never supposed to think about things like that, are we? We are just supposed to be generous and compassionate and help anybody in need, regardless. Isn't that right? Watch Jesus.

Jesus asks the man if he *wants* to be healed. What kind of crazy question is that? Wouldn't anybody with a malady want to be healed? What had Jesus noticed that made Him ask that question? In any case, the man is immediately defensive: nobody helps him; everybody cuts into

line ahead of him. Thirty-eight years is a long time to stand in line and never be first. Maybe the man was afraid. Maybe he was what we sometimes call “institutionalized.” Maybe thirty-eight years had beaten all the hope out of him. But whatever the truth, we suddenly realize that Jesus knew he had grown content to stay put with his life. Why else would Jesus have asked such a question? And how quickly the man trotted out all his familiar excuses and explanations and rationalizations. He never did face or answer the question, “Do you *want* to be healed?”

Naturally he wanted to be healed. We all want to be healed, don't we? We all want to be healed – as long as that means we don't have to make any changes. The trouble is, most authentic healing comes with changes – doing things differently, being new. Do we *want* to be healed? How much does it cost? How hard will it be? What do I have to give up?

Do *you* want to be healed? “Well, I don't know. Do I have to give up smoking, drinking, bad eating habits, workaholic patterns? Would I have to start praying, reading the Bible, caring about things bigger than my own life? Would I have to stop making love to people I'm not married to? Would I have to tithe? Would I start spending time and energy for things more important than my own life?” Do we *want* to be healed? It is a bigger question than we think at first.

My mother taught and played the piano. One day, after listening to her play, a friend said to her, “I'd give anything in the world if I could play the piano like that.” My mother replied, “Please rejoice! It only takes about one hour a day.” Of course, it turned out that while the man would give anything in the world, he would not give one hour a day. That would have required a change in his schedule – a change in his way of life. The man wanted a miracle: the magic wand should wave and presto, he could play – no practice, no effort, no expenditure of energy. The trouble is, if you play by magic, you are still no musician. On the other hand, if you are a true musician first and add the magic on afterward, then that is marvelous.

The point is: For one hour a day, anyone here can have an incredibly rich and fascinating relationship with the greatest intelligence and the deepest love in the universe. Do any of us want that? Enough to make a few changes? Do we want to be healed?

Right at this very moment, every single one of us knows some changes we need to make in our lives. We did not just learn about these changes a few minutes ago. We have known about them for a long time.

We have thought about them ... toyed with the notion ... fooled with the necessary requirements ... even tried to make these changes in half-hearted ways innumerable times in the past. Moreover, our minds seem quite convinced that these would be good changes, that we should make them, and that our lives would be better if we did. Set aside any guilt for a minute and just be curious: Is this not a strange phenomenon? This is not about just one beggar at Bethesda. This is not about just one or two of us. This is about all of us. Nobody has to be shy or sheepish. This is about all of us.

We do not always want to be healed. We can keep a little sympathy and compassion and perspective for this man near the Sheep Gate.

“Rise, take up your pallet [bed], and walk.” Jesus gives him no warning. There is no discussion. The man has barely started in on his excuses when the command – the healing Word – is spoken. At least that is the way it is told. I mean, I would still be there, discussing – staggered by the magnitude of the man’s plight, talking about how things were going and maybe about some new strategy for getting into the pool first the next time. Thirty-eight years and he never made it into the pool first a single time? A now-famous definition of insanity is: “Doing things the same old way and expecting different results.” This man had it down pat. Don’t we all?

“I’ve told that kid a thousand times ...” “Why does this always happen to me?” “She knows it makes me angry but she keeps on doing it anyway. So why do I keep responding with anger?” “Maybe this time, complaining and blaming will work – even though it didn’t work the last 763 times.” Doing things the same old way and expecting different results is insanity. Why do we keep polluting? Why do we keep killing each other? Why do we keep working for things we say do not matter to us? Does anybody want to be healed? If we want to be healed, aren’t we going to have to do some things differently?

“Rise, take up your pallet, and walk.” Some people I know claim that this is a three-pronged healing formula in and of itself. They are right, of course, but that is deep and serious stuff. I like to keep out on the friendly fringe of things, myself.

Suddenly, without any warning, Jesus commands this man to do something he has never done before. Why didn’t the man just refuse to try? Why didn’t he give it a twitch or two and then shrug his shoulders

in pathetic resignation? Something about that voice and those eyes, I suspect, and the man knew he was known – knew he could not pretend anything any longer. Fear can have as much power and certainty as faith. “Oh no! He’s telling me I can walk. If He says it, I really can. Oh No! No! No! Damn, I can walk!” If you can walk, you can work. It’s Labor Day.

I don’t think there is any way for us to know if this man was totally surprised as some new power surged through him, or if his psyche had known all along that he was capable of more than he was admitting. All we know for sure is that he is deeply resentful of his healing. And who can blame him? For thirty-eight years, others have fed him, clothed him, taken care of him. He has not had to worry about a place to stay or about who he was or what he should do. He has not had to compete, strive, succeed, or accomplish. He has not had much freedom or pleasure or exultation, either. But neither has he had many worries. One careless, accidental meeting with the Son of Man and it is over. Thirty-eight years down the tubes in just a few seconds. He cannot stay at Bethesda any longer. They have seen him walk. *Now* what is he supposed to do? Now, after all these years, he has to go to work and earn his own way.

Surely this is one of Jesus’ cruelest deeds. You think it is nice to go around healing people? The man is no longer young. He is not trained. Where can he go? What can he do? After thirty-eight years, who does he know except other beggars? At least for the moment, he is stunned. So we find no hint of gratitude. He does not stay around to talk or learn or ask questions. He has no idea who Jesus is.

Then we find him wandering around carrying his pallet, probably in the square outside the temple. Even a beggar knows when it is the Sabbath. Even a beggar knows you do not carry things on the Sabbath, especially not in the vicinity of the temple. He hasn’t changed much, has he? It is the only pattern he knows. Get attention, complain and blame, and maybe he can still find some way to turn sympathy into personal benefit.

Soon he is stopped and challenged, as he knew he would be. “Why are you breaking the law?” he is asked. “Well, it’s not my fault. The man who healed me told me to.” Oops. He doesn’t even know Jesus’ name.

Apparently the man then puts his pallet in a corner somewhere and goes on into the temple. Where else could you go if you were looking for somebody to feel sorry for you and take care of you? And there, Jesus finds him for the second time.

No matter how much sympathy I feel for this man, no matter how much I may identify with him, this last encounter brings strange things to light. You would think this would be a tender moment. A man under blight for thirty-eight years and the amazing Man who healed him – here they meet in the temple after the miracle. Surely they will embrace and there will be tears of gratitude – and will not this beggar become as staunch and faithful a follower and disciple as the world has ever seen?

But Jesus does not sound very friendly. And the man says not a word. I guess the man was doing what I do – trying to find some way to get back to his old life. He has met the Son of God and felt the invitation of Heaven, but all he wants is to go back to his old life – back to what he knows and was. So he is looking for a new spot to beg, and trying to figure out how to get a new identity that will allow him to be the same old way he always was. He is trying to recover from Jesus. That is the alternate title of this sermon, by the way: “Trying to recover from Jesus.”

What Jesus says to him matches: “*See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you.*” Up to this point, we did not know the man had been sinning, did we? And how had he been sinning? From our point of view, living on alms near a spring-fed pool for thirty-eight years does not sound very racy. It is not our idea of a wild time. Even Hollywood might be hard-pressed to turn Bethesda into much of a hot spot after dark. What sort of sinning had the man been doing? And what worse could possibly befall him?

You don’t think it is sinning to squander time and life – to let the gifts and talents God gives a person lie fallow and unused for thirty-eight years? There were surely circumstances that led this man into his way of life. There always are. And it seems that he was only semiconscious, or perhaps even unconscious, of the things that turned him into a beggar and kept him there. Nevertheless, it was alienation from God that left him in such a state.

Now it has come clear: If he turns back to his old way now, the lie will not be semiconscious. This man is in a very dangerous place indeed.

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He must turn his whole world around and head toward life and productivity. He must begin, even at this late date, to seek God's will for his life, and to grow into the integrity of his true identity. If he does not, this time the evil will go clear to the heart and core of him. Jesus knows the man is at a turning point and warns him clearly. I suspect, as doubtless you do, that this second encounter was no accident – that Jesus went to find him on purpose.

In response, the man goes straight to the authorities and tells them who it was who had instructed him to break the law. Yes, in thanks for being healed, he gets Jesus into all the trouble he can. He is not the only one with that choice either, is he? We either try to help Jesus, or we make things as hard for Him as we possibly can. You think it is an accident that the Kingdom comes so slowly and haltingly on earth? Not very likely!

Why is this a shocking story? Because this is a healing where the person had no faith at all – except faith in reverse. Why is it humorous? Because here is a man who was terrified that Jesus might heal him, and Jesus did. Why is the story so sad? Because it ends with anger and resentment where there should have been gratitude and joy. It should have led to new LIFE full of faith and promise. But as far as we know, the story leaves the man in deeper darkness than when we came in.

Of course, that is not where the story has to end for me or for you. Do you want to be healed? Are you going to rise now, take up your pallet, and walk? Are you really desirous and willing and eager to sin no more?

Jesus said, “My father is working still, and I am working.” Indeed, yes! What are we waiting for?