

THE MAN WHO DID NOT WANT TO BE HEALED

Who is the man who did not want to be healed? I realized with a shock the other day that it was me; it is my story too. Except, I hope, for the ending. I wonder: Could it in some way be your story too? If it is not your story, you will not be able to hear it. So I guess it cannot hurt to retell it.

In imagination, a very fair city, there is a huge library open to the public. While there are many people who question the research which comes out of this library, I doubt that it has a higher percentage of fiction than any other library. As with most things, it depends mostly on how we use it. Spending some time in that library recently, I stumbled onto an account of a conversation between a young boy and the Apostle John. It is supposed to have taken place somewhere in Turkey, in a little town on the Mediterranean Sea. The Apostle was now old and much revered. His Gospel was already in wide circulation, and the Christian communities he visited had the good fortune of being able to ask him about some of the incidents which he had related in his book.

The young boy was unfamiliar with either Palestine or the history and tradition of the Jews, except for tidbits he picked up from Sunday readings and the occasional visiting preacher. But for some reason he had become fascinated by the story of the man who could not get into the pool. When the Apostle came to visit his town, the boy was very excited. He followed him everywhere, listening to him with more concentration and perception than some of the adults. Finally one afternoon his vigilance paid off. There was a lull in all the conversations and meetings, and the old man was left alone to relax for a while. He and the boy walked along the beach, sat throwing rocks into the water, and talked.

“I hope you won’t mind,” said the boy, “but I just have to ask you about the man in the pool.”

“The who?” said John.

“You know – the one in your book. The man who was trying to get well by getting into the pool first.”

The old Apostle started to chuckle, then came right out and laughed. “I haven’t thought of him in years,” he said after he calmed down. “Glory be, but that man was a case!”

“Gee, I didn’t know it was a funny story,” said the boy.

“Oh yes,” said John. “It was very funny – and very sad too. Jesus was often full of playfulness and humor, even in the midst of some pretty serious situations. Lots of times we couldn’t tell whether to laugh or cry. This story started out really funny and ended up very sad. But the look on that man’s face ...” John started chuckling again.

“But I don’t understand the story,” said the boy, pleading. “I’ve heard it read lots of times but it always confuses me. It seems like the man never acted happy or thankful about getting healed. He didn’t even bother to find out Jesus’ name! I would think that if somebody healed me, I would at least want to know his name. And afterward, Jesus went looking for him and talked like He was upset about something. And the man kept getting Jesus into trouble – it was almost like he was doing it on purpose. I don’t understand at all.”

“Well, well,” said John. “You really *do* listen, don’t you? I can see we’re going to have to tell this story from the beginning. The fact of the matter is, it’s a hard story to tell. In the end, it made Jesus pretty unhappy. He said afterward that maybe if He could have done things a bit differently, perhaps He wouldn’t have failed with this man.”

“Golly,” said the boy. “I thought Jesus never failed at *anything*.”

“That’s the way I feel about it myself,” said John. “But Jesus tried to help people nobody else would have looked at twice. It didn’t seem to matter to Him how hopeless the thing looked from the beginning. Even so, if He couldn’t reach the person, you could tell that it bothered Him a lot. But let me see if I can explain what really happened.” John sat for a few minutes recollecting, and wondered how to put it so the boy could understand. Then he began:

You’ve heard us talking a lot these past few days about the law of sin and death? (The boy nodded.) Well, it’s hard to understand any story unless you realize that this law is always at work in every story. There is something in every one of us that tends to make us sick, sorrowful, and discouraged rather than healthy, hopeful, and joyful. When you boil

it all down, the reason Jesus came was to pull us out of the “death side” and put us on the “life side.” To put it bluntly, some people get so far down the “death side” that even Jesus cannot reach them.

We found this particular man living at the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. It was kind of a poor-man’s sanitarium, and a healing shrine. It was centered around a pool of water called Beth-zatha, which means in our language “House of the Olive.” In our tradition, the olive tree is considered the tree of life, and the olive itself is a symbol of the blessings of prosperity and healing.

Beth-zatha was a favorite location for all sorts of people with physical ailments. But there was also a crew of “regulars” who lived there as beggars, being reasonably sure that they would be supported by alms from the Jerusalem synagogues and religious pilgrims who passed by. It was like a wishing well in reverse: you made your wish and jumped into the pool; if your wish did not come true, people would come along and throw coins to you.

John glanced at the boy and caught the smile crossing his face. He really liked this young man. And he went on ...

Some of the people who came there were very sincere in their faith and really wanted to be healed. And over the years, lots of people *had* found healing at the pool. Faith is a powerful force, even when its object is not fully understood. It changes a person’s inner attitude and puts him back in touch with hope and confidence, and with a life-energy that is stronger than most people know. Only, the pool couldn’t teach about God, or give people a new purpose for living, or change them on the inside with reasons that could last – so it didn’t always work. A half truth is not enough for most real problems. Most people have to come to know God for themselves.

But some of the “regulars,” like the man we’re talking about, just hung around the pool on a full-time basis. They were the kind who never got better, and who never got discouraged with the pool like you knew they would have if something hadn’t been fishy. They weren’t really hoping or expecting to be healed. They just knew that Beth-zatha was a very good spot for beggars.

To be fair, they never admitted they were true beggars, and they always talked about how they would someday get healed and go back

to a productive life. But truth be told, they had found a comfortable spot from which to leech their way through life without having to assume responsibility or take a chance on failing. Their infirmities were an excuse for everything that was wrong with them. That big excuse led them further each day down one of the pathways of sin and death.

It was a sad thing to see those people crawling around. You would think they couldn't manage to survive to the end of each day, yet they survived year after year. The minute you tried to help them, they acted as if they were on their very last ounce of energy and that if you hadn't come along, they would have died right on the spot. Then when you came back five years later, they would still be there, still managing somehow to get by, though just barely. There seemed to be a lot more life underneath the surface than they were letting on, but you couldn't get hold of it. The minute you "added in," they "subtracted out" – to keep what we called "the beggar's balance."

That was one thing Jesus told us again and again: You can never help anybody unless you can cut behind "the beggar's balance." And boy, He could do it too! But even with Jesus, a person had to respond a *little* bit.

This particular man had been a regular at Beth-zatha for *thirty-eight years*. Can you imagine that? In all that time he had never managed to be the first one into the pool. We all thought it was a very sad case, but Jesus said to us: "He must not want to be healed very badly. I bet he's scared to death of that pool."

Being around Jesus, you were always getting shocked with statements like that. None of us had thought about it from that angle. There are a lot of people who live by a kind of hidden death principle. But it isn't very obvious unless you spend a lot of time trying to help people. Healers in all ages have known it. If Luke ever comes to town, ask him how many people need faith and how many need medicine. He will tell you that lots of people need both, but he will also tell you that people need faith first or the medicine won't do very much good.

People like this man don't always know it, but they are enemies of life and therefore enemies of God. They hide behind such clever masks that they fool even themselves. None of us like to think such thoughts about people who are suffering, and we don't like to get too clear-sighted or objective about it for fear of making a mistake. But even when

you *know* and you aren't mistaken, it is almost impossible to do anything to help. Helping usually just brings immense anger, as we will shortly see.

Our Lord was a man with a holy war against the law of sin and death no matter where He found it. Seeing a person all tied up by the "death side" just bothered Him like nothing you would believe ... unless you knew Him. He would walk right in on the most impossible situations you could imagine. That's why He was always getting into so much trouble. We used to say that if the Devil invited Him to dinner, He would go – but the Devil would end up saying grace.

You know the next part of the story. The man was lame – hadn't walked for thirty-eight years. "How do you *know* he can't walk?" Jesus asked us. "I bet he hasn't even *tried* to walk for thirty-seven years. He can crawl just fine. A man who can crawl without faith can walk *with* it."

The funny part of the story came the next morning. Jesus walked right up to the man and asked him point-blank, "Do you really WANT to be healed?" The man was dumbfounded. You could see him blush from head to foot. I thought for a minute that he might start swearing a blue streak. It was a terribly insulting question. Yet Jesus had this way of putting things so you knew He meant a lot more than the insult part. Even so, the man couldn't give Jesus a straight answer. He just started hauling out his whole army of excuses: It was hopeless. He had been there so long. He had tried everything. Nobody cared about him. Nobody would help him into the pool. He had a hard time getting enough to eat. The pain was terrible.

"*Rise, take up your pallet, and walk!*" I can't say it the way Jesus did. We all jumped when our Lord's voice broke in like that. Just for an instant, there was this awful silence. Then the man came over on his knees, rolled up his straw mat, stood it on end like a cane – and came up on his feet. He was a little shaky. He took a few steps around, using the mat as a cane, then took one look at Jesus and walked off almost as steady as any man. We all stood there with our mouths hanging open.

Then I looked at Peter. He was starting to grin. "It's strange," I said. "He stomped out of here without a word or a smile, like somebody had played a dirty trick on him." "They have," said Peter. "Now he has to find some way to make an honest living."

There was an unhappy kind of humor to it. Thirty-eight years of self-pity. Thirty-eight years of living off of other people. Thirty-eight years of babyhood – all gone in just a few minutes. Now he had lost his excuses and had to grow up. The man was actually angry because Jesus had given him back his legs! He didn't want to have to stand on his own two feet.

We had felt so sorry for him before, that now we couldn't help but laugh a bit. If he had shown even a little gratitude, it would have been different. But his anger shined a spotlight on all the secret fraud.

We all gathered around Jesus, asking how this had happened. After all, to heal a man with great faith is miracle enough. But to heal a man who doesn't have any faith and who doesn't want to be healed ... how could that happen?! "People sometimes have more faith than they know," Jesus said. "I only called his bluff. He had used that bluff for so long that he thought it was real – except on the inside. Inside he was so afraid that I *could* heal him that it was a powerful kind of faith, only in reverse. If you fear something enough, you believe in it. How do you think Satan gets so powerful here? This man has been secretly afraid of this happening for so long that when I came along, he couldn't ward it off. But I didn't *heal* him – he is sicker now than he was before." Jesus' voice was full of pain, and He broke past us and went after the man.

You know the rest of the story. The ungrateful wretch headed straight for the temple and the priests, carrying his pallet in full view. It was the Sabbath Day and he knew they would have to object, because working was forbidden on the Sabbath. Carrying a pallet was considered work, and so was healing. Working on the Sabbath was disrespectful of the Law; it was like thumbing your nose at God. Before the day was over, half of Jerusalem was talking about it. And of course, not having been there, they were angry at Jesus. It was this man's way of taking revenge on Jesus for trying to help him.

That night we were all talking about it. It made us angry, and Peter thought it would be a good idea to go punch the man right in the nose. But the Lord just said, "If you are going to be my disciples, you too will try to help people, so you might as well learn to expect such things. Besides, *you* don't have to punish him. He is an expert at punishing himself. You will never be able to match his skill in that department. A poke in the nose is nothing compared to the agonies he devises for himself."

“But then what’s the point?” we wanted to know. “Why bother? What’s the use if this is the reaction?”

“You know that it doesn’t always work out this way,” said the Lord. “I did not intend that it should this time. If he could have felt some glimmer of thankfulness before it hit his pride; if he had felt the delight of his body in motion; if he could have relaxed for a moment, forgetting his own opinions of himself and the opinions of others; if he could have smiled in the realization of the Father’s love and power, open to him and intent on his well-being – if he could have felt any of it for even a moment before the pride and anger and shame came flooding back in, it might have worked.”

“But it didn’t work that way this time,” He continued. “There are, after all, many ways to hate life and to make love fail. This man’s whole life has been one of vengeance. He has hated life because it challenges him to grow beyond himself. His vengeance has been to prove that life is a miserable mistake and a hopeless burden. He tried to take revenge on me because, for the moment, I have taken away his proof that life is a tragic and meaningless affair. Those who knowingly or unknowingly despise their own lives do in fact hate God, and many of them will end up cursing the Son of Man. But who knows? Maybe tomorrow or next year or five years from now, the man will wake up and realize that he can walk – that his life is getting better. Perhaps he will look up then, out of his angry, self-centered little world, and give true thanks to God. On that day, the real healing will begin to take effect. No story is over until its end.”

“I don’t think I like the story anymore,” said the boy after a while.

“Maybe that will teach you to go wasting your afternoons talking to old men,” said John, with a twinkle in his eye.

“But I don’t see how anybody could be mad about being able to walk again,” said the boy.

“You already walk – even without faith – don’t you?” asked the old man.

“Yes, I suppose so,” said the boy.

“Well, what do you suppose the Lord would make possible for you to do if you let *His* kind of faith flood into *your* life?”

The boy sat for a long time staring at the tide pools and the waves. “I guess that old beggar wasn’t such a strange guy after all,” he said at last.

The old man smiled quietly and nodded. “Lucky thing for us that the Lord never stops fighting the law of sin and death,” he said, as much to himself as to the boy.

The sea was calm and the boy started skipping rocks over the water again. “It has been a very pleasant afternoon, young man,” said John, “but it’s time to wander back and find some more folk who need to get off of their pallets.”

That night, Christians were dying in Rome, across the sea. And the old man talked to the grown-ups about the dangers of their faith and why it was important not to be discouraged or give up, lest the world should never know the story of Jesus, or the LIFE that He proclaimed and offered.

A young boy sat deep in thought with a strange new fire burning in his breast. “If a man can crawl *without* faith, he can walk *with* it.” And what of someone who could walk, and even run and jump, without faith? What could *he* do *with* it?