



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Nineteenth Sunday After Trinity, October 14th, 2012

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠**

St. John's account of Jesus' healing of a man suffering from a form of paralysis by the pool at the Sheep Market begins with a strikingly peculiar question. "Wilt thou be made whole?" Jesus asks him -- or as the more modern versions of the Bible translate it: "Do you really want to be made well?"

This seems a decidedly odd thing to say to someone who has been paralyzed for 38 years and who spends most of his time hanging out around a miraculous pool by the sheep market, apparently in hopes of being healed. What on earth does Jesus expect him to answer? "No thanks"? Or "Can I take a rain check"? Of course the man wants to be cured . . .

But on reflection Jesus' question isn't entirely daft. It is, in fact, quite profound. If somebody other than the Savior of the World had asked the question, the sick man might well have replied indignantly: "Are you nuts? Of course I do."

The questioner, however, was not just anybody. It was Jesus, Son of God, whose unique power and authority is summed up in the collect that begins the Eucharist: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid . . ."

His questioning probed the depths of the sick man's soul, compelling him to examine his heart. Were his prayers for a miracle simply a formality? Was he, perhaps, really quite content with his lot in life?

There is nothing rhetorical about the question:

Some people are actually content with the burdens life imposes upon them -- and by no means always for entirely foolish reasons. Folks might complain constantly about the bad hand life has dealt them, but take their burdens away and they'd lose their entire reasons for living. Ill-health, bad luck and burdensome responsibilities -- all can be employed to gain sympathy. They make useful tools for manipulating other people.

Most of us know such people. They are the folks who use ill-health as a means of dominating and controlling friends and family. Offer them a cure and they'd find good reason to reject it. For without it, the way of life they find quite congenial would vanish in an instant.

The man Jesus met at the pool by the Sheep Market might well have fallen into this category. Consider his response to Jesus' question. He doesn't give Jesus a direct answer. Rather, he says: "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me."

This does not answer the question Jesus asked. Jesus didn't ask him why he had not been healed. He asked if he really wanted to be healed. And, far from giving him a straight-forward reply, the man launches into a long explanation as to why he has not been healed.

His prevarication was not entirely unreasonable. A person afflicted with paralysis for 38 years could expect to experience profound changes in his life were he to be healed -- by no means all of the for

the better. For starters, he would have to find another way of earning a living – probably a daunting prospect for a person without skills.

The people who hung out at the pool by the Sheep Market – the blind, lame and paralyzed – were mainly professional beggars. And in Judea at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, begging was often a comparatively lucrative business.

Rabbis taught that the Law of Moses required observant Jews to give alms to every genuine beggar they encountered. Rich Pharisees even went to the length of hiring watchmen to make sure that no beggar, even unwittingly, was overlooked. A truly pitiful-looking cripple had a meal ticket for life. They often married and provided comfortable livings for their families. Ghoulish though it might at first seem, poor folk tended to regard a crippled child as a family asset – a very useful source of additional income.

All this must have gone through the crippled man's mind as he tried to respond to Jesus' question. Had his questioner been anybody else, the man could have replied with a pious formula. But confronted with Jesus' divine authority he was forced to examine his conscience and answer honestly.

His first instinct was to obfuscate: "Sir, I have no man to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up." But then his unspoken answer -- the answer that lay in his heart – was: "Yes, with all my heart, I do want to be healed."

How can one say this? Why else would Jesus have said to him: "Rise take up your bed and walk"? Confronted by the power of Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, all of the man's doubts and base thoughts were swept away. He welcomed Christ into his heart. Strength flooded his paralyzed limbs. And, John tells us, he took up his bed and walked.

It is highly unlikely any of us, thanks be to God, will have to support ourselves by begging as the paralyzed man did. Even so, all of us have a good deal in common with him. Frequently, like him, our prayers are simply empty formulae. Indeed, if God, in his wisdom, were ever to answer some of our prayers, there is a strong possibility his help and assistance wouldn't be entirely welcome.

One of the great saints of the Church is Augustine of Hippo, a major city in Africa, at a time when it was one of the mightiest provinces of the Church. Augustine truly understood sin – and by no means solely from an academic perspective. He also had practical working knowledge of the subject – which, doubtless, explains why his writings on the subject have such an extraordinary ring of truth.

Augustine was a bishop when he died in 430 AD, but he hadn't always been so saintly. His problem sounds surprisingly modern. He was a sex addict. Indeed, to say that he was very fond of ladies is to put it mildly. Ladies seemed to occupy his mind for most of his waking moments – to the profound distress of his mother, a pious Christian lady called Monica.

Eventually, his mother's prayers converted him to Christ. Even so, Augustine just couldn't get sex off his mind. In his autobiography, he recalls that it didn't seem to matter how much, or how hard, he prayed, his obsession with the ladies remained as strong as ever.

In the end, Augustine realized he had been deceiving himself. While thought he was praying: "O, God grant the virtue of chastity." In his heart, he was actually saying: "O God, grant me the virtue of chastity but not just yet."

This should tell us something important about the nature of prayer. Prayer isn't what we say with our lips. Prayer is what we say in our hearts. The words we say with our lips are irrelevant. The fine phrases, generous notions, kind and noble sentiments we utter both publicly and in private are mere hot air unless we believe in our hearts what we are saying. If we don't feel genuinely sorry about the sins we confess, our prayers are as empty as Augustine's pleas for chastity.

Jesus looks into our hearts in exactly the same way that he looked into the heart of that paralyzed man almost 2,000 years ago and asks us: "Do you really want to be healed?" The answer that he is looking for will be found not on our lips, but in our hearts . . . and in our lives. *AMEN*

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