

Sermon May 1, 2016 John 5:1-9 John 8:1-11 “Stones and Healing”

“Do you want to be healed?”

Jesus asked this question of the man who had been sitting by the pool, hoping to be healed, for thirty-eight years! What a question to ask! Of course the man would want to be healed! And yet, perhaps for all of us there is some taken-for-granted question that we need to hear and answer in order to receive the life Jesus would give us.

The other lesson from John we heard today showed Jesus challenging those who had brought the woman caught in adultery to him, demanding that Jesus take a stand on the punishment prescribed by the Law of Moses, which was death by stoning. Jesus declared that whoever was without sin should cast the first stone.

The religious authorities had hoped to trick Jesus by bringing this guilty woman to him. Jesus was sitting in the Temple, teaching a large crowd there. The Pharisees pushed into this crowd a woman who had been caught red-handed in adultery. They asked Jesus, “The Law of Moses commands us to stone her; what do you say about this woman?” It was a trap. If Jesus showed leniency and forgave the woman her sin, then they could prove that Jesus contradicted the Law; and if Jesus upheld Moses’ command to stone adulterers, then he would contradict his own teachings and cause followers to fall away.

But the Pharisees misunderstood Jesus. He did not come to abolish or loosen the Law, but rather he came to offer God’s forgiveness to those who fail to satisfy the Law. Preacher Bruce Hedman had a wonderful statement about this: “Jesus did not come to change the Law; he came to change people. The purpose of the Law is not to tell us how bad other people are; it is to tell us how bad we are, so that we will come to Jesus for forgiveness. ...Jesus wanted people to apply God’s Law to themselves, not to others...” (P. 86-87, “Casting the First Stone, *Best Sermons*, Harper Collins, 1993)

“Do you want to be healed?”

The two scriptures we heard today aren’t usually read together, but it seems to me that they complement each other quite well..

“Do you want to be healed?” Some may respond: “Me? I’m not sick or in need of any healing! Go heal somebody else!” Certainly the Pharisees would have said this! “We’re in good with God, we’re righteous, we’re the good guys... Those other people, they’re the ones who are sinners!” For anyone who feels this way, there are Jesus’ words in John 8: “Let the one without sin cast the first stone...”

Stones. We know how to cast them. We hurl stones of gossip, stones of derision, stones of racism and sexism, stones of jealousy, stones of anger, stones of accusation and blame. But Jesus looks at us with eyes that understand not only our pains and angers, but also the reasons for them, and he says, “If you are without sin, go ahead and cast a stone...” And then he asks the deeper question: “Do you want to be healed of this negative attitude? If so, you need to

fix your eyes on me, and remember why you are a Christian in the first place... Trust me, and let me forgive you, let me show you what is important in life, and your heart will be healed.” Can we trust, do we really want to be healed?

Over and over we hear Jesus’ promises: “Come unto me, all you who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest... Seek first God’s kingdom, and the other stuff you need will be provided...” But we end up swamped in the wilderness of money worries and family problems and illnesses and all the things we are sure we must have... And the things of the spirit get put on the back burner with all those other “best intentions...” It doesn’t take long for our spirits to become critically ill.

The negativity of life can eat us alive. In his book, *The Medusa and the Snail*, Dr. Lewis Thomas, noted pathologist, described an interesting occurrence in nature, which I shared here a few years ago. The medusa is a jellyfish. The snail belongs to the nudibranch variety. Both live in the Bay of Naples.

Sometimes, when a snail is small, a jellyfish will swallow it by drawing it into its digestive tract. The snail, however, is protected by its shell. The jellyfish cannot digest it. The snail, then, attaches itself to the jellyfish and begins to eat the jellyfish. By the time the snail is fully grown, it has entirely consumed the jellyfish that had swallowed it in the first place. (taken from *Cups of Light*, Clarence Cranford)

Do you want to be healed of whatever is eating you? Cancer and physical conditions are one type of scary challenge, but other things may be even more deadly. Physical illness and suffering end at death; spiritual illness comes to a focus at death. Resentment can eat us alive and kill our spirits. Someone hurts our feelings or does something hateful to us, and we end up hating them back. Hatred consumes the one who hates. So does worry. Jesus told his followers, “Do not be anxious about tomorrow, what you will eat or wear.... Your heavenly Father knows what you need..” (Luke 12) But we are still swallowed up in anxiety, all types. Anxiety, hatred and worry feel like acid on our hearts. These things are sin.

Sin starts small and grows fast and soon takes over as it forces more and more distance between the heart of the sinner and the heart of God.. Sin is turning away from God. Sin is hurting someone else. Sin is whatever pulls us away from a life-giving relationship with God. We quickly feel too unlovable, worthless, or far away from God. We can barely hear Jesus’ call to us: “Do you want to be healed?”

The late Clarence Cranford, who pastored a Baptist Church in Washington, DC., once offered this illustration: “One of the delights of music lovers in the nation’s capital are the concerts of classical music often held in the Library of Congress. For many years these featured the Budapest String Quartet and later the Julliard String Quartet. In these concerts, skilled musicians played on priceless Stradivarius instruments which did not belong to them but were the property of the Library of Congress. When the concerts were over, the musicians returned the instruments to the custodian, who kept them in a special place at the right temperature and

humidity to preserve their resonance for centuries to come.

Cranford gave his point: “Our lives are like that. They are not ours to do with as we please. They come from God. They belong to God. One day they must be returned to God, who alone can keep them for eternity.

“Yet some people treat their lives as if they were only cheap fiddles, to be discarded when the concert season is over. Stradivarius would not have taken such pains to produce matchless instruments if he had expected them to be thrown away after the concert. And God would hardly have created each of us with a distinct and unique personality, if God intended us to be discarded forever at death.”

“In fact,” says Cranford, “the Bible proclaims that this life is not the real concert. Life as we know it is only a rehearsal, where we get ourselves in tune with God’s love and will and where we learn to play in harmony with others. As the instruments must be tuned to the piano’s ‘A,’ so we must get in tune with God, who has sounded his ‘A’ in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (From *Cups of Light*, p. 44, adapted)

In the gospel lesson today, the woman was forced into Jesus’ presence. She never asked him for forgiveness. He did not give it to her, either, but simply told her that he would not condemn her; she should go and sin no more. The Pharisees never caught on. They tried to take somebody else to Jesus to have her condemned, but they never acknowledged their *own* need for his forgiveness. They simply left when they had to admit that they were not sinless.

WE, though, have this story to remind us that Jesus came to offer forgiveness to whoever would come to him and confess his or her sin. He did not come to change to Law; Jesus came to change people. Even us.

“Do you want to be healed?” May this question open our hearts to God’s truth and forgiveness, that we may be changed, and become obedient to the One who came to give us life, life now and life forever. Amen.