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Healing the man at Bethesda

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Traditional healing is alive and well all over the world and also in the Pacific. These days often a traditional cure is preferred over Western medicine. Unless it is as easy as popping a Panadol in your mouth then in Samoa the Samoan fofo or taulasea is often ones first port of call. The taulasea deals with physical ailments whereas the taulaitu deals with matters spiritual. Some people might call the taulaitu a Sharman, but that word has negative connotations and people often put in the category of witchcraft and so called black magic anything that is unfamiliar comes under suspicion. The Samoan fofo or taulasea uses everyday herbs and oils to remedy different ailments. Chinese medicine also has so many remedies for the all the different ailments in life.

Medical cures in the days of Jesus were little more than trying to conjure up divine intervention as in this story. Superstition had it that an angel would come and cause the water at Bethesda to bubble into a spring and if you were fast enough to get in the pool whilst the spring was bubbling you would be healed. I wonder if it's a bit like what happens in a spa pool when you put in on full power.

Jesus bypasses all the centres of power of Jerusalem and goes to a place where no one has power. This hospital-like place around the pool is dank and smelly and filled with people lying around, waiting for a miracle, hoping for wholeness and new life. The Bethesda pool attracted a crowd of the destitute who knew they had come to the end of their rope, and the end of their hope. Bethesda was

a mass of humanity at its lowest point of hopelessness. Everywhere Jesus turned, there were voices of despair crying out for one last chance, one moment of hope. It was, in many ways, a place of final hope. Jesus obviously must have seen the despair in these people's faces.

The desire for healing is the obvious reason so many were gathered in that place that day. For the crowd of people suffering from illnesses, their last and desperate hope for healing was found in the pool. Archaeologists have actually uncovered the reservoir which formed the pool and alongside it a faded fresco with a picture of an angel troubling the water. There was a legend about the pool. The story goes that an angel would periodically come down from above and stir up the water. Afterwards, the first person to step into the pool was healed from their sickness.

While walking through these corridors of despair, Jesus meets a man who has been sick for 38 years. He is a paralytic literally "dried out". He had been sitting there for years. Jesus saw the lame man and knew he was not a new visitor. He knew this man could not walk and was lowered into place by the pool, hopelessly waiting for a miracle.

He walked up to the lame man and asked him, "Do you want to be healed?" The man responded hopelessly, "I don't have anybody to help me go into the pool. While I'm trying, someone steps down in front of me and enters the water." There is no indication that the sick man knows anything about Jesus—or even that he recognizes that anyone important is present. He doesn't seek out Jesus. He doesn't ask to be healed. The initiative belongs to Jesus, who chooses the man from the crowd and asks if he wants to be healed.

Do you want to be made well? Why would Jesus ask such a question? We think, "Of course, the man wants to be made well, Jesus!"—but perhaps he

doesn't. Not everyone wants to be made well. Some people enjoy being pitied or dependent on others. Some people are reluctant to leave the familiar and explore possibilities for a better life. It is difficult to impose healing on a person who is comfortable with the way things are. Such a person is likely to sabotage efforts to produce change. Perhaps the man has gotten so accustomed to his predicament that he has given up any hope of change: Is it possible that people live with something for so long that it creates their identity – often to the extent that they cannot conceive of themselves without that identity-defining illness?

“Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” (John 5:7)

It really isn't too hard to understand how his spirit would become defeated. Not only is he “dried out” in body, but his spirit has also dried out as well.

Jesus said to him, “Arise, take up your mat, and walk.”

Before the lame man could say or do anything else, he was healed. He stood on his feet and walked away.

As the man began walking, the Jews saw what happened and realized that Jesus had done another miracle on the Sabbath. Rather than opening their eyes to the act of healing the Jews remained blinded by their traditions. Instead of being grateful for witnessing a miracle, they were angry at Jesus for healing on the Sabbath.

Even though “the action” is over in a flash, it seems useful to take a closer look at what has happened. Rather than joining the other disabled people in waiting for the healing powers of the pool, Jesus does something unexpected. Instead of helping the man into the water so he could be healed, Jesus asks him to get up, pick up his mat, and walk.

The action Jesus takes is symbolic. It is in line with what Walter Brueggemann describes as the prophetic task: “to maintain a destabilizing presence, so that the system is not equated with reality, so that alternatives are thinkable, so that the absolute claims of the system can be critiqued.” (1)

Even though the paralytic and the other invalids at Bethesda had been taught that “the system is the solution,” on their small scale, the system (the Bethesda Pool) was a solution only for some, at the expense of all the others. By telling the paralytic to get up, pick up his mat and walk, Jesus taught him to bypass the system and to challenge it. Brueggemann writes, “The goal of the managers and benefactors is to stabilize the system so that it is not noticed that it is a system, but there is only reality.” (2) Jesus taught the paralytic that indeed there is life outside the system.

This story does aptly reflect a different kind of paralysis which is chronic in religious communities.

For us, what are the issues that we stumble on that detract us from addressing the real issue? Was the argument for the Jews one of healing on the Sabbath or was it one of putting the commandments so high in the order of priority that following the law took precedence over helping another fellow human being?

What are some of the types of paralysis that can keep us looking downwards most of our life? What are the issues that cause paralysis by analysis. What do we need to do in order to be freed and healed so that we stand upright and look at all that is around us?

Perhaps God is telling us to get our priorities right. Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, scriptures are also subordinate to the purpose of love. God’s focus is not about self-satisfaction and greed and success as it is with so many who have power and wealth and want to keep it, but about generosity and

giving, restoration and healing, encouraging and renewing. When any of these means (commandments, laws, scriptures) cease to be seen in that light, they become ends and we find people in absurd conflicts about whether they help someone in need or obey God. When those become alternatives, something has gone terribly wrong if you believe God's chief concern is caring concern for people.

As we make connections to our own world, the Bethesda story reminds us of the fact that social and economic systems meant to assist the needy often keep them in poverty.

In the 21st century concern has been growing that an increasing number of New Zealanders, especially children, have been pushed into poverty where poverty is defined in income terms as households living at below 60% of the national median income.^[5] In 2005, an international report found that one in six children in New Zealand were being raised in poverty – making New Zealand children 23rd poorest out of 26 rich nations. Between 1982 and 2011, New Zealand's gross domestic product grew by 35%.^[1] Almost half of that increase went to a small group who were already the richest in the country. A shocking 40% of Pacific Peoples have an income below the poverty line, with Māori coming in second with nearly one-third of their population experiencing poverty.

Professor Jonathan Boston of Victoria University says nearly 20% of poorer households in New Zealand now depend on welfare benefits. He says the growing gap between rich and poor enables the rich to "exercise disproportionate political influence", and that "if disadvantaged citizens are not to be excluded from political life, they must have access to education, healthcare and social assistance"

In our own world, the Bethesda story reminds us of the fact that social and economic systems meant to assist the needy often keep them in poverty. Let's hope we are not defined by our sicknesses and disabilities but by our integrity and our ability to interact and live in a world that is full of inequities in a way that still gives us hope and freedom in Christ. Amen.