



What Do You Want?

TEXT
John 5:1-9

April 15, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

What if you came to worship today to discover that everyone else had a conflict? Your friends couldn't make it. The choir all had laryngitis, so they stayed home. I overslept. Cindy Wilcox told the ushers to take the day off. It was just you and, of course, God. But you decided to stay, and in your meditation, you had the feeling that God was asking you something. God wanted to know: What do you want? What do you really want?

What would you say?

There was a man who had been ill for 38 years. Every day he made his way to this pool. Or maybe he was carried, we don't know. But somehow he comes to this pool. It was a pool that, under the right circumstances, promised healing. Under the right circumstances, a fullness of life could be restored. It was a remarkable pool of water there by the gate Bethzatha. You see, the tradition was, the water would hold healing power on occasion. Every now and then an angel would trouble the water, instilling healing powers, and the first one to enter it would

receive the benefit. Of course, as Fred Craddock points out, such a system will always benefit those who suffer from such maladies as sunburn or dandruff, rather than paralysis.¹

For 38 years, he came to this pool. Of course, at the end of each day he returned home — if he had a home — much the same as he had arrived that morning, unchanged, still living in the shadow of an unfulfilled promise. He was unchanged, unless his hope had withered a bit more.

In January of 1980, the US hockey team, cast with volunteers, was victorious over the much-favored Russian hockey team in the Winter Olympics. It was called the "Miracle on Ice." That same year, President Carter refused to send US athletes to the Summer Olympic Games. They were in Moscow, and we protested Russia's invasion of Afghanistan.

In May of 1980, Mount St. Helens erupted. It was the largest volcanic eruption in US history, blowing away the north face of the mountain and spewing ash over an 11-state region.

On a less disastrous note, the American Music Awards identified the top rock group of 1980 as the Bee Gees, and

the favorite male vocal artist was Barry Manilow. I don't know if that is less disastrous than a historic volcanic eruption or not.

In 1980, I was struggling through American History at Presbyterian College, and I was trying to learn how to play *Carry On My Wayward Son* on the guitar. All of that happened 38 years ago. It seems like a lifetime ago. So much has changed. As a matter of fact, it seems that if it was possible to change, it has changed since 1980.

Jesus met a man by the pool. Jesus asked him, "Do you want to be made well?"

"Yes! Finally! At last! For as long as I can remember, I have been waiting for this day. I come here every day waiting on my angel to show up."

Of course, that was the man's response, right? Well, actually no. The man says, "Sir, I have no one to help me. Someone always beats me into the water."

What is that? Is that yes? Is that no? Is that definitely maybe? It may seem surprising, but I don't think this guy knows what he wants. I mean, of course, a part of him wants to be healed. Why else would

he be at this pool? But on the other hand, after a while, life teaches us to just make our peace with the way things are. I don't think he knows.

Do you know what you want?

I am thinking of my mother-in-law right now. She loved to go out to eat. But she was a remarkable cook, and my father-in-law loved to save money, so he preferred to eat at home. But when we would all get together, we would go out. She would labor over the menu, taking in every cooking style and spice.

"I just don't know," she'd say. "I haven't had salmon in so long and it looks so good." "Is your salmon good here?" she would ask. "Oh, no, no, I'll go with the shrimp. Just can't go wrong with shrimp." And without fail, when the meals were brought to the table, she would look at what someone else had ordered and say, "Oh, that looks so good. I should have ordered the pork chop."

Sometimes it's hard to know what we want. And the uncertainty can make us anxious.

Do you know what you want for yourself? Do you know what you want for your faith? Do you know what you want for our nation?

It's a question a lot of young adults are asking. They are living between their parent's mortgage and their own mortgage, and those years are so often filled with uncertainty about relationships, uncertainty about vocation and purpose.

Armed with a college degree, some real interests, but great uncertainty of how any of that creates a career, if there are careers anymore.

From the outside, it may appear an enviable position: nothing to tie you down; you are free. But often on the inside there's anxiety. When we don't know what we want, it creates anxiety. We can feel frozen, like we are waiting for life to find us; like we are waiting on our angel to show up and make everything right.

Tim O'Brien writes about his experience of the Vietnam War. The book is called *The Things They Carried*. His draft number came up. He didn't want to fight a war he didn't believe in. He writes, "I hated war. I hated Boy Scouts. I hated camping out. I hated dirt and tents and mosquitoes. ... I didn't know a rifle from a slingshot. I was a liberal for [goodness] sakes." If they needed fresh bodies, why not draft some guy who believes in this war.²

He lived in Minnesota, so he drove north to the Rainy River. An old, backwoods guy named Elroy Berdahl rented him a room and took him fishing. They sat in his boat on the river — home on one side, Canada on the other. He writes, "I sat in the boat while Elroy watched his line. I looked at the old man, and then I looked at Canada and I broke down and wept.

He writes, "Perhaps you can understand why I've never told this story before. It's not

just the embarrassment of the tears. What embarrasses me much more is the paralysis that took my heart. A moral freeze. I couldn't decide. I couldn't act. I couldn't comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity. I didn't decide, I just submitted."³ He was caught between conflicting wants.

Often we live with divided hearts. We want conflicting things. It's part of every day. As a night person, the best time of the day comes after sunset. I love those late-night hours. But I also like my job, so here I am. Hope you're happy.

To be human is to live with a fragmented heart, seldom wanting just one thing and often wanting conflicting things. I remember the day my daughter went to college. We dropped her off in the middle of Iowa. God did not wire daddies to leave their daughters in Iowa. I cried all the way home. But here's the thing. The only thing worse than leaving her at college would be if she had said, "You know, I've been thinking it over. I don't think I'll go to college. I'll just live with you guys. Work at the mall."

No, you can't do that! She was doing exactly what I wanted her to do, but I didn't want what I wanted.

To be human is to live with a fragmented heart.

Jesus asked this man, "Do you want to be made well?"

"Well, I don't have anyone to put me in the water."

"But do you want to be well?"

“Someone always beats me into the water. That’s my problem.”

What do you want? I don’t know.

James K. A. Smith says this is the first question that Jesus asks of us: “What do you want?” Smith says, what we want defines us. “Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow.”⁴ So, what we want matters.

Jesus asks this man what he wants, and he doesn’t know.

And this is important: Jesus doesn’t say, “Well, think about it and I’ll check back in a month.” No, Jesus just heals him.

What is that about? If I understand the text, it suggests that Jesus has wants. Jesus has wants for us. The best way to describe the wants that Jesus has for you is what he called the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, we want what God wants.

Smith says, “Discipleship is a way to curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love.”⁵

Part of what happens in our journey of faith is that we learn to align our wants with what Christ wants for us, for our community.

I will tell you that I believe one of the things we are doing together in worship is rehearsing again and again and again what it is that God wants for us and for you, so that we might align our hearts, align our wants with what God wants.

If you came to worship today to discover that every-

one else had a conflict, you were here alone — you and, of course, God. But you decided to stay and, in your meditation, you had the feeling that God was asking, “What do you want? What do you really want?”

What would you say?

A good place to start is, “I want to want what you want for me and for the world.”

Over the next six weeks, we will reflect together how we might curate our heart to align with what Christ wants for us.

¹Fred Craddock, *The Gospel of John, Knox Preaching Guide* (1982), p. 43

²Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*, p. 40

³Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (1990, 2009), p. 54

⁴James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (2016), p. 2

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 2

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.