

On Being Made Whole

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“Wilt thou be made whole?” – John 5:6 (KJV)

The text for this morning’s sermon is the question Jesus put to the man beside the pool of miraculous waters in the Temple portico: “Wilt thou be made whole?”

That is the question the earthly Jesus Christ posed to a disabled man roughly 2,016 years ago. It is the same question the crucified and risen Jesus Christ puts to every disabled man and every disabled woman here in these pews today: Wilt thou be made whole?

It’s the question Christ puts to every person who has ever lived, because none of us is whole. None of us is complete in the perfection of God’s will for us, and the world we inhabit and the world we create. We are all, without exception, disabled in body, mind, and spirit – dis – abled, no longer able to be the reflections of the divine image that we were created to be.

We reflect the world – “too much with us,” as Wordsworth reminded us – or we reflect our class in our supposedly classless society. Or we reflect the families into which we were born or the families we struggle to create – struggle because we know how often we get it wrong and fall short of the ideal or even our own capacities. Or we reflect the biases of our gender or our race or our sexual orientation, or the winding and wounding path that has brought each of us here this morning.

And most especially do we reflect the egos that drive us relentlessly – that sense of self that enthrones itself at the center of our consciousness and urges us to believe ourselves to be apart from rather than a part of everything else.

We reflect these things, day in and day out, week in and week out, and much more readily and much more easily and much more clearly than we reflect God’s divine image. “At present,” Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12, “we are looking at a confused reflection in a mirror,” and that confused reflection is the image of our own distorted selves – our disordered loves, our lukewarm devotion, our fractured loyalties. That is our dis-ability, our original and perpetual flaw.

And so we know that it is for good reason that the question Jesus put to the man at the pool is the question he puts to us in the pew: Wilt thou be made whole? Do you wish to be more complete, more nearly perfect, more nearly like God than you are at this moment? Do you wish to live a life of integrity, soundness, and wholeness? Do you long for that happiness that Will Cather described as being “dissolved into something complete and great”? Do you really want that for yourself? That is the question of the Christ. What will you answer?

Yes, of course I do, I can hear most of you saying; why else would I be here? We answer Jesus’s question with our own: Why else would I be a member of this or any church if I did not wish to be made whole? Is that not what the church is for – to make us more Christlike?

Yes, but only indirectly. The church is to make us more church-like, but it is the work of God's Holy Spirit that makes us more Christ-like. And being church-like is not a bad thing, because the church is that microcosm of God's realm on earth where we attempt to create a little space and a little time to be our better selves. We behave – or at least we attempt to behave – differently here in the hope that practicing such behavior here will encourage, strengthen, and equip us to behave better out there. If only for an hour or so, we try to set aside our quick-tempered, corrosively critical, and morally compromised selves so that we might together become the body of Christ, and individually members of it. We attempt to clear a space in our unnecessarily cluttered and harried lives to give “the better angels of our nature” a place to stretch their wings and play.

And so we push back against the principalities and powers of our age that tell us to hurry, to worry, or not to care at all. We DO care, here, and not just for ourselves. So we have written and dedicated letters to Congress on behalf of people we will never know, except insofar as we know that they are poor, and that they deserve the chance not to be poor. In our version of capitalism, it is very easy to fall into poverty and very hard to get out, and that way of making the rules and playing the game, far more than the safety net that allegedly coddles the lazy and undermines initiative, has created the chronically poor.

And of course there's nothing new about poverty. Jesus said that the poor would always be with us, by which he reminded us that we are not, as societies, whole. We do not love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Americans spend, on average, less than three percent of their income caring for our neighbors, and that figure hasn't budged for decades; the remaining 97 percent we spend caring for ourselves. We love ourselves far more than we love our neighbors – the numbers do not lie – and so we hear the Christ question over again: Wilt thou be made whole?

The question is not rhetorical. We say we want to be whole, but wanting and willing are not the same, which is why I've used the old-fashioned language of the King James Version of Jesus's question, rather than the more anemic version of the NRSV that I read for you a few minutes ago. The point of Jesus's question is not what we want; the point of Jesus's question, to us, is what we will – will for ourselves and will for our world, for we do only what we are willing to do, for better and for worse. That's why the rich young man who said he wanted eternal life walked away from it – he wasn't willing to do what was necessary for him to get it. What he wanted and what he willed were two different things. It's not enough to want to be whole; we have to will it. And so, finally, the question is put to us once more: Wilt thou be made whole?