

“Want or Won’t?”

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Based upon 2 Kings 5:1-19; John 5:1-9

In 2007, a woman named Edie Littlefield Sundby was diagnosed with stage IV gallbladder cancer.¹ Her doctors said that she had multiple tumors and probably about three months to live. Terrified and filled with despair after receiving her diagnosis, Edie sat in her car looking at everything around her. She saw the beauty of the trees, heard the song of the birds, and felt the warmth of the sun. “How can I die and leave all this?” she thought. Then she noticed a shape falling across the seat of her car. It was the shadow of an old mission bell. So, she turned to God in prayer, pouring out all her sorrow and fear, and felt God give her a clear response: “Accept that this is what is happening and keep moving.” She forged ahead, enduring debilitating chemotherapy and multiple surgeries, including having most of her right lung removed. In the process, she clocked hundreds of miles driving between Stanford and San Diego passing many of the old mission churches. That was when she began to feel that God was calling her through all the bells she had seen to do something extraordinary: to walk the California Missions trail, a trail which stretches 800 miles from San Diego to Sonoma. Writing about her experience later, Sundby said, “It was absurd since I’d never walked more than a handful of miles and lung surgery left me short of breath walking upstairs.”² But with the support of friends and the help of a camper van which served as home base, she set out putting one foot in front of another.

“Get up and get walking,” God told Sundby. Maybe that’s something that God tells a lot of people because it is basically the same thing that Jesus told the man by the Sheep Gate pool almost two thousand years ago. *The Gospel of John* doesn’t tell us what the man’s diagnosis was because there weren’t many possible diagnoses back then. So whether he suffered from a physical problem like chronic pain, epilepsy, leprosy, or paralysis, or something emotional like clinical depression, paralyzing grief, or anxiety disorder is anyone’s guess. All we know is that the man had been “ill” for 38 years and was hanging out by the Sheep Gate pool in Bethzatha because people believed that the water had magical healing properties when it bubbled. Legend had it that the bubbles were caused by an angel stirring up the water, and that the first person in the water when it started to bubble would be cured. Despite spending what in biblical terms, was just shy of a lifetime hanging out by the water, the man had yet to be cured.

Now in the Bible, waiting is sometimes a good thing to do. From the stories of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years to the stories of any number of barren women waiting lifetimes for miraculous births, there are plenty of stories which suggest that God sometimes makes us wait for what we want so that we will be better prepared for it when it arrives. But this wasn’t one of those times. Jesus clearly thought that the man had been waiting far too long by the pool because instead of approaching him like a pastor or a healer, offering compassion and assistance, Jesus asked him with almost an exasperated directness, “Do you

¹ See “*God took me on a pilgrimage to peace*” in SIMPLE GRACE, Sept. 2017, 22-25.

² *Ibid*, 24.

want to be made well?” Actually, in the Greek he says, “Do you want to be made whole?” which is an important distinction because Jesus never promised that the man would be cured of what ailed him. Instead he asked him whether he wanted to keep making his brokenness the defining feature of his life, or was ready to move on and make his life about something else.

Most of us know how debilitating chronic pain can be, and how clinical depression has a physiological component to it that cannot always be overcome by sheer act of will. But in this particular situation, Jesus wasn't being mean or obtuse about such things when he asked the man by the pool what he really wanted; Jesus was being astute. He knew even before the man began offering excuses for why he hadn't managed to get a toe wet in 38 years, that at least part of the man did not want to be well because if he really had wanted to, he would not still be where he was.

Naamen, the main character in our Old Testament lesson today, in contrast, appears to have wanted to get well. A general who worked closely with the King of Aram (Aram is now called Syria), Naamen was a man of action. He was used to having power and control, to being in charge. So when he came down with leprosy, he knew he had to do something. Leprosy in the Bible is a term that describes any kind of skin disease, not necessarily Hansen's Disease. But in those days even something like psoriasis could have robbed him of everything that mattered to him. He would have had to be isolated; he would have been ostracized. He would have gone from being big cheese to pariah in about ten seconds flat once people found out. So even though it was his wife's servant handmaid who mentioned that there was a cure in Samaria, not a Syrian source, the possibility of a treatment was enough to make Naamen jump up and get going. He got a note from the king to give to the king of Israel, got his caravan together, and set off.

But like the man at the Sheep Gate pool, Naamen soon found that the cure he set out to find wasn't really the cure that he needed. First of all, it wasn't going to come from a king. The king of Israel didn't know anything about curing leprosy, and even tore his clothing at the thought that a foreign power might expect him to and then start a war when he didn't follow through. Then when Naamen learned that a weird prophet was going to be the healer, he was shocked when the prophet did not deign to come out of his hut to honor and idolize him as he felt his status warranted. In fact, Elisha barely gave him the time of day. “Go and wash in the river,” Elisha said, as if Naamen were a servant not a general. The whole thing was offensive and humiliating to Naamen. If it weren't for his servant, who gently persuaded him to try the treatment even though it was easy, not hard, Naamen, like the Sheep-Gate man, might have found himself stuck. He might have chosen misery out of a combination of pride and unwillingness to admit his real need.

Walter Brueggemann has argued that Naamen is a stand-in for a needy world waiting for rescue.³ We want to be saved, but at the same time are reluctant to admit our real need, and are too prideful and stubborn to accept the kind of healing that God wants to offer us. I don't disagree. But I also think that both of these texts invite us to put ourselves in the main

³ Brueggemann, Walter, “2 Kings 5: Two Evangelists and a Saved Subject”, in *MISSIOLOGY: AN INTERNATIONAL REVIEW*, Vol. XXXV, no. 3, July 2007, 265.

characters' shoes as well, not just the world or the church. These texts ask us, "Do you also resist healing, or choose misery over the wholeness God desires for you and can give you?" The late Dr. William Glasser, a famous psychiatrist and author, built his whole successful career on the assumption that we do resist. He said that although it seems counterintuitive, people frequently choose misery either consciously or unconsciously for a whole host of reasons. According to Glasser's book, Take Effective Control of Your Life,⁴ one reason is to keep from feeling and expressing anger. There is a lot in this life that can make us angry, not the least of which is when circumstances do not go as we plan. No one plans to get cancer. No one wants to lose a job or a spouse or find themselves flattened in some other major way. But in our culture, at least until recently perhaps, anger is not seen as an effective long term strategy for getting what you want.⁵

Most of us learn this sometime between ages two and seven or eight. Before age two, a temper tantrum will get you all the love, attention, and service you want. After that, it is more likely to get you a time out or grouchy parents than anything else. So one of the behaviors we learn as children in our culture is to depress our anger, and feel sad or broken instead. This makes us behave in a passive way, which tends to rally people around us to offer love, good cheer, and often help. Glasser argued that most of us learn this lesson so well when we are children that by the time we are adults, we don't even realize that we are choosing to depress ourselves instead of express anger. We don't realize that we are choosing at all. But we are.

Sometimes people reject the way to wholeness in favor of being miserable, not because they are angry, however, but because they are unwilling or unable to choose doing something more effective. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are lazy, although some people are. More often people choose passive misery because they fear that the more effective route will be harder, require change, more work, or letting go of a past dream. They also fear failure and rejection. So even though it is painful to dwell in passive unhappiness for years on end, those who choose to do so make the choice unconsciously because part of them feels protected by doing so.

But according to Dr. Glasser, the most common reason people choose to stay in an unhappy or broken state, is neither anger nor fear. It is the desire for control. Like Naamen, we want to feel in charge of our lives. So when something happens outside of our control, the easiest way to regain control is to dig in your heels and insist that the problem is someone else's. I knew a woman in one of the churches I served years ago who went through a very painful divorce. I met her fifteen or so years after the divorce, but she was still hanging on to that pain as if it were yesterday. Her ex-husband was to blame for everything; there was nothing wrong with her, nothing that she needed to change. The narrative of the-woman-done-wrong made her feel righteous and strong and energized. So even though blaming others did not help her build a new life, she kept on doing it. By the time I met her she had been doing it for so long that she didn't know how to be anything else.

⁴ Glasser, William, Take Effective Control of Your Life (New York: Harper & Row, Pub. 1984).

⁵ *Ibid*, 53-69.

“Do you want to be made whole?” Jesus asked the man by the pool. It’s a deceptively simple question. Who would say “no”? Yet if we answer it honestly, the answer is usually closer to “no” than we realize because it is a “Yes but...” a conditional “yes.” “Yes but, it is too hard.” “Yes but, I don’t have the time.” “Yes but, I’m too old to start over.” “Yes but, the world won’t let me.” So to get people moving, Glasser used to ask his patients a similarly simple but equally challenging question: “Is your complaining helping you?” “Yes and no,” the Sheep-Gate-man would have said if he were asked the question and was capable of an honest, reflective answer. His complaining was helping him endure a lifetime of waiting. It was making him feel better about himself, but it wasn’t really getting him either the rescue that he wanted or the wholeness that he lacked. His complaining was not healing him. Likewise, Naamen’s complaining was not getting him any closer to the clear skin and healthy body he needed and craved. Yes, it was making him feel like the general he had been before he got sick; but no, it wasn’t healing him.

What would your answer be to these questions? Do you feel whole? If not, do you really want to be whole no matter what it takes to get there? Have you been complaining about something for a very long time? If so, does your complaining help you? I think we all benefit from complaining sometimes because it brings us the support and the encouragement we need, and I think there are times when we all need to sit with depression, especially when we are grieving, for the same reason. We need to acknowledge our loss, and need people around us who will cheer us and carry the load for a while. But if we focus on our brokenness for too long, we can lose sight of the fact that God has not consigned us to brokenness; we have. Similarly, if we choose passivity for too long, either because of fear or pride, then we can lose sight of the fact that God is always trying to help us become more whole. The “cure” just may not be in the form that we think we want or deserve. No matter what is going on in our lives, God does not desire for us to live our whole lives in pain. No matter what is going on in our lives, God can still make some good out of it. The better choice, therefore, when we are feeling broken, is to choose to be honest, to admit that we are in a place of misery, and then get walking. Splash some river water on your face, put your trust in God, and step into the future. Whatever lies ahead, it is better than being stuck in the same place for just shy of a lifetime, and it is also better than being isolated by illness or injury.

This is what Edie Sundby decided. She did not know how much time on earth she had, but she was determined to embrace it rather than hold tight to her pain and anxiety. So, six months after her lung surgery she set off to walk the 800 miles of the mission trail from San Diego to Sonoma. Despite enduring brutal conditions and physical pain, Edie felt indescribable joy once she was moving. “From the first day,” she said, “I felt a heightened well-being—each mile was a soulful connection to a natural rhythm... As I walked, each breath in became ‘grace in’ and each breath out became ‘cancer out.’” For 55 days, she walked 14 miles a day. When she finally finished the walk, she felt connected to God like never before. Then two years later, her cancer returned in her remaining lung. Determined to walk away from fear and despair, Edie endured more radiation and surgery and then embarked on the second 800-mile section from Loreto, Mexico to San Diego. This time she needed mules and guides to cross mountains and deserts, and battled scorpions, cacti, and heat.” But she made it. In 2015, after having been given a 0.9% chance of surviving cancer, she became the first person in 250 years to walk the

full 1,600 miles of the El Camino trail. “We don’t know what we’re capable of until we trust God and push outside our comfort zone... I know that when we walk with God, no matter what, all is well.”⁶

Not everyone gets cured of what ails him or her in this life. Not everyone gets the life he or she wants either. But we all can have more abundant life and greater wholeness with God in our lives. So whatever your circumstances, say “yes” to being led by God’s love and then get moving. Whether or not the way ahead leads to miraculous cures, or makes your original dreams for your life come true, the way of God is always way the way to go because it is the way of grace, and the way to wholeness and peace. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ *Ibid*, SIMPLE GRACE, 25.