



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS: THE LAME MAN BY THE POOL

~ Scripture: John 5:2-9a ~

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#### STORY

In the 1992 movie *Born on the Fourth of July*, Tom Cruise plays a Vietnam War vet who is wounded. . .paralyzed from the waist down. . .and sent home. This young man who had been the picture of health, independence and competitiveness merely sits around feeling sorry for himself—and drinking. His self-pity turns into rage. His rage glides from bad to worse. And he alienates himself from his old sweetheart, his friends, even from his own parents.

He runs from relationships and from reality. . .dives into a drunken tour of Mexican bordellos. . . finally hits bottom. But then he begins to get hold of himself. The movie actually ends up having a happy ending, when Cruise finally forgets his self-pity and begins taking charge of his life.

But few people, once they have fallen into the “*victim mentality*”, ever leave the pity party and move on. Many learn how to get mileage out of their misery AND how to avoid taking full responsibility for their own actions & choices. A lot of kids find out early on they can get even more attention by going down a negative path rather than a straight one. There’s always plenty of support from the “peanut gallery” of negative, less popular people to draw them downward.

Here’s the real danger of a “*victim mentality*”: it causes us to be self-focused, egocentric, and narcissistic (self-absorbed). In our talk, we focus on ourselves (*e.g.: why we are sick, how much it hurts, how harsh the world is, why we are losers*). We blame anyone and anything but ourselves. It’s always something or somebody else that’s getting in the way of our being able to function or accomplish what we want or reach our goal.

Do you know someone who’s stuck in self-pity? It’s hard to be around someone who dwells endlessly on his/her mishaps & woes. They’re miserable people. . .and they make everyone around them miserable. Because they do not see themselves as responsible for their own emotional health and well-being, they end up dependent upon everyone else for their happiness.

Let’s see how Jesus dealt with one such man given to self-pity and attention-getting—in **John 5**. What we’re going to see here is a Jesus who is where people are (available), sensitive and helpful even to those who have become unattractive in their pitiful obsession with self. Let’s read. . . . .

*<sup>2</sup>Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. <sup>3</sup>Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed—and they waited for the moving of the waters. <sup>4</sup>From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease he had.*

In Jesus’ day, this pool was where people came in hopes of experiencing a miraculous healing. It was a pool

deep enough to dive into and to swim in. The portico where all the sick & afflicted people gathered was what you could call the first *HOSPITAL*.

The last verse I just read [v. 4] is left out of most reliable manuscripts, because the moving of the waters by an angel was pure superstition. Truth of the matter is, beneath the pool was a subterranean stream which every now & again bubbled up and disturbed the waters. If people did get healed, it was not because of the properties of the water or supernatural activity.

This was the kind of belief that was very common in that day. People believed in all kinds of spirits & demons. . .and they had a great reverence for water:

- They believed when person was about to ford a stream he should pray & wash his hands, cause anyone wading into water was subject to spirits that inhabited the water.
- People wouldn't rescue someone being carried downstream because they thought that the spirits had taken him. Bad news if you were the one in trouble! ☹
- It was common practice to fling a handful of corn (or some other offering) into a river before attempting to cross—just to appease the “spirits”.

Superstition is belief too! Belief that maybe, just maybe, something's going to happen. People then were looking for an out-of-the-ordinary occurrence. . .an extrasensory-mystical-magical “experience”. . .a psychological super-charge of sorts. It was true then; in a way, it's true today.

Let's get back to our Scripture. . . . .

*<sup>5</sup>One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" <sup>7</sup>"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me." [Do you hear a little “whininess” in his tone?] <sup>8</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." <sup>9</sup>At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.*

**The Man at the Pool of Bethesda:** a classic case of self-pity. 38 years an invalid; 38 years trapped in a sick body. His mind was starting to be affected. He no longer possessed a desire to help himself. He had lost just about all hope of ever being healed.

38 long years! That's about as many years as the Children of Israel wandered in the desert—stuck in “no man's land” with no forward movement. The “self-pity”, the “poor me attitude”, the “I am a victim” mindset, the “blaming”—all had become a way of life.

What a grim scene Jesus found at the pool. This was not what we think of when we think of a “pool”. We think of a body of clean, clear water that's fun to splash around in. [Show a slide of another “Bethesda”—**Bethesda Fountain in NYC.**] We like to go swimming. We think: sunny day. . .children playing. . .cooling off. . .fun in the sun. . .games & competition. [Some youth in our congregation have gone quite far in the “sport” of swimming / water polo.]

None of that was going on at this pool. This was a place where disabled people—all kinds of them (e.g.: blind / lame / paralyzed) came—lots of them, says John in v. 3. It must have been some sight. Bodies everywhere. Moans & groans. . .stench. . .begging. This was not “another lovely day at the beach” with bathing beauties + well-groomed, muscular guys walking around. This was a scrap heap for broken-down people.

**I. THE SIMPLE FACT THAT JESUS WAS AT THIS POOL IS WORTH NOTING**  
He was where the hurting people were. He was *available*—even to the “leaner”, the complainer.

What do we normally do with the “pity junkie”? We avoid them. We don't want to go around them. Life is

already full enough of discouraging news and negativism. Who wants another earful of someone else's aches & pains? Or be around a person who chronically feels sorry for himself?

Jesus does! That's who. That is the way He is. It is in his nature to go to those who hurt. He was not afraid to head into the portals of human misery. If he were here today, he would not side-step the inner city with all its winos, panhandlers, bag ladies and cripples. He wouldn't steer clear of people in convalescent homes, hospitals, or mental asylums.

He is where you are today. You may feel as miserable as this lame man did. He's there. He's available—if you're in physical-emotional-relational-spiritual pain. He's not limited (or con-trolled) by your faith. . .or lack thereof. In fact, He wants a relationship with you AND whole-ness for you more than you do.

God meets us where we are. But beware, He won't leave you as He finds you (i.e.: as you are).

Look how He deals with the lame man. . . . .

## **II. HE ASKS HIM A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION**

Notice (in **v. 6**), Jesus doesn't ask him: "*Do you believe I can make you well?*"

Rather, He asks: "*Do you want to get well?*"

With this question, Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter.

Let me role play this. I'm Jesus, standing in front of this poor man. And he tells me he's been trying to get into the pool for a long time. He says, "*Nobody will help me. Everybody is too interested in their own welfare. They just pass me by and leave me in my misery. Nobody cares. Nobody pays any attention to me anymore. I've become kind of invisible.*"

And I (playing "Jesus") say: "*OK, you've been crippled 38 years. . .and been coming down to this pool for much of that time. Yet in all those years you've never been able to get yourself into that pool? I'm not buying it! Are you sure—very sure—you want to get well?*"

You see, it was not a lack of faith holding this man up. Something else was going on here. Jesus put His finger on it. I believe this man had a fear of the responsibility he'd have to take on if he could walk again.

I think Jesus was onto him. I think he could see through the smokescreen of excuses to a soul that had "given up" and become passive. I can't prove it beyond a shadow of doubt, but I suspect this man—in his heart of hearts—might well have been content to remain an invalid for life. He had gotten "comfortable" with collecting a few coins in his cup day-by-day—enough to buy a few crumbs of bread and some other vitals. If he was cured, he would have to shoulder all the burden of making a life and a living. No one would be there to take care of him—he'd have to take care of himself. He'd have to get down to the unemployment office on Monday morning, and begin dealing with all the hassles of getting into the work force (e.g.: lay-offs, low pay, overwork, putting up with mean bosses & co-workers, etc.).

So, Jesus was asking: "*Are you sure you want this medicine? You might get better, and then what?*"

**ILLUSTRATION:** When I worked in the inner city, I came across a lot of prisoners who couldn't function in the "outside world". I remember one in particular. He appeared to be doing very well and seemed responsible. So we put him in charge of security in one of our buildings (called "the Mansion" because that's what it was). One night he stole an expensive oriental carpet right out of the Mansion, which of course bought him a one-way ticket back to Jackson.

**ILLUSTRATION:** I've known many a person with an addiction who couldn't function in the sober, straight, normal world. They keep going back to that which is destroying them.

Probably all of us have some chronic issue, sin, habit or hang-up that "addicts" us. . .grabs our soul (our will) and oppresses, abuses, and makes a victim of us. And we keep going back.

So the question before us today is:

- Do we really want to get well. . .to be made whole?
- Are we willing to quit making excuses and complaining about “the way things are”?
- Are we willing to pay the price that comes with wholeness and health?
- In the words of **Step 6**: *Are we entirely ready. . .?*

Jesus wouldn't accept the lame man's excuses. He didn't pity or feel sorry for him. Instead, He challenged him to dump his denial. . .to get honest. . .to accept responsibility. Then. . . . .

### **III. HE COMMANDS THE MAN TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE**

“*Get up!*” he said. Get off that pallet and walk. Instead of this bed carrying you, you carry it! [The mat he was on was light enough to carry.]

And to everyone's amazement, the man obeyed. He got up and walked.

What is it for you this morning? What is it He's asking you to do that seems impossible?

Is He asking you to **WALK** in some kind of new (or different) way?

- Are you ready to do it?
- To take a next step (or the “first” step). . .to make a decision. . .to make a change.

**GOD WILL OFTEN LEAD US TO THINGS THAT ARE IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT HIS HELP!**

Our willingness + God's power is an unbeatable combination in every situation.

There are so many things in this world which defeat us. If you have an intensity of desire + a determination to make the effort, then the power of Christ will take over. And with Him we can conquer what for so long has conquered us.

### **CONCLUSION**

Lest you think I've been unduly harsh toward the poor afflicted Man by the Pool of Bethesda, let me say in his behalf:

- He was obedient (when Jesus asked him to do the impossible).  
No more questions. He was ready.
- He did camp himself as close to the place of healing as he could.  
Jesus met him and brought him the rest of the way.

It may be that you are here today, and have gone about as far as you can—and you need help. You need His help to take you the rest of the way—on through to **r**ecovery / **r**edemption / **r**estoration / wholeness & healing and the **r**esponsibility that comes with it.

He'll do it! Are you ready?