

Perhaps you know someone (hopefully not you) whose life is a mess. She intends for her life to be different, but her thinking is “off”, her behavior is really “off,” and she never seems to get any better. she’s just stuck.

I don’t know if Dr. Phil still has his show on TV --- but no one was on Dr. Phil if they had their life together. I remember watching him talk with person after person, family after family, who was “stuck”. One reason I think that show was popular, was that we, the audience, often could clearly hear the “stuckness” in their stories, even when the featured person could not. Dr. Phil listened to his guests, and reflected their behavior back at them, and then asked them: “So, how’s that working for you?”

That’s what I hear Jesus saying in today’s gospel lesson. Jesus walks through the Sheep Gate to the pool of Bethesda where those in need of healing gathered. Tradition had it that sometimes an angel would come and stir the waters, and whoever stepped into the water first after the stirring, was made well. Jesus sought out a man who had been waiting by the water to be that first person to step into the water. For 38 years.

Jesus must surely have thought to himself, “So, you’ve been sitting there for 38 years, waiting for someone to help you. *How’s that working for you?*” Instead Jesus asks him out loud, “Do you want to be made well?” The man answers a question Jesus did not ask. His answer is the story he’s been telling himself for a very long time: “I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and when I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.”¹

. Jesus knew that this man was in need of deep healing. Deeper healing than being able to walk again. This man could not imagine any possibility for healing outside the one in his head ---- his plan of someone else picking him up and taking him to the pool. Jesus healed him and reminded him to pick up the mat he had been laying on for years, The man is made well, he takes up his mat and walks.

This sad sick man, is offered wholeness and responds with a pathetic plan that hasn’t worked in 38 years, a plan which he still is gripping tightly. He is stuck in the thought loop of “if only someone would.....” In fact if Jesus had asked him what one thing in all the world he might want, this man might have said, “I want someone to take me to the waters,” rather than “I want to be made well.” If someone had asked him, why are you here by the pool, he might have answered, “so that I can get in the water;” rather than “so that I can be healed.”

¹ John 5:7

He was stuck on a small, short-term goal ----- the water --- , rather than focused on a larger purpose ---- wholeness and healing. His thinking was too small, and it wasn't working for him.

All of the healing stories in scripture tell us something about God and something about our need for God and healing. This story is a little different however. This is not a story of faith leading to healing, like other healing stories might be. In fact, the scripture doesn't mention any evidence of faith on the man's part.

This healing story is really a story about flexibility and the willingness to listen and respond to what we are asked to do, an invitation to reframe the questions we ask ourselves. It highlights how we as individuals and as communities are prone to cut ourselves off from God's abundance by our intractability and our small thinking.

There's yet another layer to this story. The phrase " Now that day was a Sabbath"² is our clue that while this is a story about so much more than one man being healed. You never hear the scripture say, it was Wednesday morning, do you? It doesn't matter on which day of the week this story happens, unless it happens on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath meant that no work that wasn't an emergency could be done. and not only was this man's need certainly not urgent; after all he'd been paralyzed for 38 years. Jesus might have waited until the next day, when such an effort was allowed. Jesus intentionally inserts himself into controversy ----- in which Jesus seems to picking a fight with those in authority.

Jesus even made a point of inciting him to do the same. Picking up one's mat and taking it with him was not simply a way to clean up after himself. Picking up one's mat and removing it to another place was work that was forbidden on the Sabbath by the religious codes of the day. The religious authorities were watching and listening and heard Jesus' command to break the rules.

On a regular basis Jesus challenged people's assumptions. hoping to break open their thinking, rather than helping them to tighten their grip on what they believed to be true or on how they had always done something. Jesus challenged people to get unstuck: that included the man in need of healing as well as the religious authorities who witnessed the scene.

A tight grip on our way of thinking can lead us farther from God. It's easy to see how silly that is in someone else's behavior: not so easy to recognize it in our own lives or those institutions which we hold dear. When we as individuals, or as communities and institutions *tell God why something is impossible, we guarantee that it will be impossible.* If we constantly use the phrase "if only someone would...." we're never going to move from the place we are stuck. We will never be whole as God intended.

² John 5:9

On one level, this story is a biblical self-help message. Each of us gets stuck from time to time. Each of us benefits from evaluating our “plans” and our goals and our thinking on a regular basis. It’s good to discern if we might be telling God what we think is necessary for our lives to be whole.

It’s even easier to get stuck as a faith community, because in a congregation we are surrounded by like-minded people who tend to think in the ways that we think, and reinforce our thinking.

Sometimes we get stuck asking God to send us more members and more pledges, rather than asking God to open us to the ways we can take his message of love to a hurting world.

We get stuck in thinking – if only more young families would move into the area, if only we had more money we could do more mission, if only more folks would drive by and notice the times of our services on a new sign out front --- if only....

Perhaps we need to shift our thinking and enlarge our thinking and see ourselves as being transformed so that we can bring God’s love to our broken world.

Just as the goal for this paralyzed, stuck man wasn’t to get into the water, it was to be healed. The goal of the church is not to have more members or a bigger budget, but to share God’s reconciling love with more and more people.

All of what we do is directed by God’s purpose for God’s purpose. It’s really a question of stewardship of our thoughts and our goals. Just like the man at the pool, we have short term goals, and long term goals.

We have close relationships within our faith community *so that* we can serve others in the community in which we live. We have fun together so that our relationships are strengthened *so that* we can serve others. We gather to deepen our understanding of God’s word and purpose *so that* we can serve others in God’s name.

How can we keep from being stuck? By asking God --- again and again --- to open us to new ways of being. By evaluating what we’re doing and how it’s working for us. By praying for flexibility and creativity in our thinking in our work together. By keeping our mission of being a loving community and bringing God’s love to a hurting world always before us. Always.