**Sermon**

First preached at Broad Street United Methodist Church of Statesville

January 21, 1979, revised September 2024

 **“Learning to Ask the Right Questions of Life”**

In Jerusalem during the days of Jesus, the “Pool of Bethesda” had a reputation for healing powers. It was surrounded by an impressive structure built by the Romans with elaborate colonnades. There were large porticos surrounding the pool itself and the water was deep enough in which to dive; so, during warm weather there were always swimmers. It was fed by an underground stream which archaeologists discovered in later years.

Several times a day the pressure would build up on the underground stream and force the surface of the pool to gurgle and bubble in a way that people called it the “stirring of the water.” The belief arose that it was caused by an angel of God’s coming to “trouble the waters,” and the first sick person to get in that day when it had been stirred would be healed. So, the porticoes were always filled with people who were lame, or blind, or paralyzed or had other diseases BUT when the waters bubbled up, the tradition was that only the first person in the poor would be healed.

The day that Jesus visited the Pool of Bethesda, it was the Sabbath. One day Jesus visited the Pool of Bethesda. As he surveyed the crowd, his attention fell on a certain man. Jesus said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The man repeated his plight which had told hundreds of times before, “Sir, the reason I cannot get into the water for is that though I have been lying here for thirty-eight years, no one has helped me get there first. I have no friends to help me; so, someone else always gets into the healing water before I do.”

In John’s Gospel, he tells us that the man had been lying by that pool daily for thirty-eight years, always with that fatalistic philosophy of self-pity and in loneliness. Imagine being sick and neglected for thirty-eight years when in your mind healing waters were available if only someone would help you. All his days had been lonely, helpless, and hopeless. We can only imagine his bitterness about lack of a hand up, faith in God’s help, and apparent lack of love or concern by family, rabbis, or strangers.

When Jesus arrived that day at the pool of Bethesda, he did not form a healing line. Jesus did not explode their old myth by telling them that no angel came down and stirred the water so that the next person in would be healed. He preached no sermon; he delivered no teaching. Jesus simply walked over to the man who had been lying there daily for thirty-eight years, intuitively knew he had been there day after day for most of his life, and said, “Do you want to be made well?” The man explained his plight. Jesus ignored the wrong question which was, “Why can’t I be the first to get into the healing water?” Rather Jesus simply said, “Take up your mat and walk.”

Isn’t it a lesson to us if we are tempted to just give in and give up on our own life situations when we are lonely, sick, poor, or emotionally forsaken? Each of us can become a victim to hopelessness, lack of inner peace, faith in humankind or God. Through lack of friends and family and faith in God, we can just live and live and live year in and year out with the same frame of mind that this man had by the Pool of Bethesda.

Until Jesus came into the man’s life, no one in thirty-eight years had offered to help him. Then Jesus came to the pool. Of all the people there, Jesus immediately focused on this man. Now we need to take the truth in this small vignette in Jesus’ life and apply it to our own. Are we asking the right questions? Are we going to the wrong source for healing and help and hope There is so much wisdom in our old gospel hymns. If we have anything in common with the man bathed in self-pity and loss of hope by that Jerusalem pool, let’s say or sing often,

*“What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear.*

*Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?*

 *Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share?*

 *Do thy friends despise, forsake thee? Jesus knows our every weakness.*

*Thou wilt find a solace there.”*

 It was this story in the ministry of Jesus that inspire Joseph Scriven to write the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Mr. Scriven was a young lover in Ireland when his fiancé was drowned two days before their wedding. He migrated to Canada. Where he fell in love again, but his second fiancé was baptized in the icy Canadian waters, took pneumonia and died. He became a tutor for the children of a wealthy family, but in his free time, he went from door to door and chopped wood for poor people and widows--people who used it to both cook and heat their homes. He was known as a person who literally would give people the coat off his back. One day when a friend was visited Joseph Scriven, he noticed a scrap of paper on which Joseph had scribbled the words to the hymn we know as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” The friend asked about the poem and Joseph said he had written thirty-one years earlier when his second fiancé died and had mailed it to his mother in Ireland. He said he read it each night when he went to bed. A short time later, Scriven became delirious with a fever, wandered out of his house and was found dead face down in six inches of water. Few of us have had more sorrows or more faith that the man who gave us the words of promise, “In his arms he’ll take and shield thee; thou wilt find a solace there.”

What questions are we asking? Jesus might be saying to us, “Do you really want a change in your life?” Do really want inner peace and deeper faith and higher hope? What Jesus asked immediately touched the depth of that man’s soul and aroused within him a new sense of will power, a new reason to rise up out of a lifetime of self-pity, to lay aside his excuses of blaming other people for his not being healed, a new sense of determination, a new desire to live a more abundant life with a positive step.

The man walked away carrying the bed that had carried him for thirty-eight years. As Christians, our official faith statements are that God wants to perform that sort of miracle in our lives. He wants us to overcome our self-pity and our blaming others for all that is troubling us. God’s will is for us to have new dimensions of our lives and fresh expressions that we think are reserved for other people.

I have been so impressed with a truth that the Russian writer, Dostoevsky, taught us in the 19th century. He wrote, “Of all the animal kingdom only mankind does not know his own formula.”

Although I grew up in the country and saw lots of animals, some domesticated and some wild, it is only the past two years of watching the animals in my own back yard that I have seen the wisdom in Dostoevsky’s statement, “Only we humans do not know our own formula for survival.” As I watch many varieties of birds, a colony of squirrels, a rabbit, a hawk, the cicadas who climbed out of their holes last spring after seventeen years of being in the ground. I study the ants and the bees and the butterflies and even the earthworms I am amazed! They know how to find food and water and shelter and instinctively know how to reproduce themselves for another generation.

 Last spring I gave a friend a bluebird nest and she spent hundreds of hours seeing a pair of bluebirds select that box for their homme, built their nest so neatly with twigs and line it softly with pine needles, saw the female lay eggs and sit on the nest as the male brought her food, then saw both parents feed the little hatchlings and one day she was amazed to see, on the same day, all the little birds fly away to begin a life of their own I am amazed at the hummingbird who spends summers sucking nectar in our yards before their flight to Guatemala for the winter.

We cannot always change our life circumstances. We cannot bring back the loved ones we have lost. We cannot always be healed of the disease in our bodies. But we can learn to cope with our lives, to play the hand we have been dealt, to color our own parachute, to learn to sing our own song. Jesus told us to knock, and doors would be opened, to seek and treasures would be found.

What Jesus is challenging us to do is to pick up the mat of our self-pity, put it under our arm and begin walking on our own.  Our temptation is to dwell on the "Why?" question.  Why, in many instances, will never be answered so we resort to the blame game.  Sometimes it is God who we blame for suffering, tragedy, misfortune, and what other people do to us.  This will lead to helplessness, hopelessness, bitterness, anger, or depression.   There is an old saying, "I felt sorry for myself because I had no feet until I saw a man who had no legs and he was happy anyway!"  So often, if we can work past our self-pity, we can rise up and walk.

That is, if we ask the right questions! Too often, when we want to change the circumstances, the quest ion we ask is “Why?” For the most part, we never shall get our “why is this happening to me?” question answered. Oh, we can blame our employer, an ex-spouse, or the national economy, or climate warming, but more often, these questions result in a “woe is me?” attitude of helplessness and hopelessness and bitterness or anger or depression.

I never bite when people ask me what I think heaven is like. I have no attraction for the figure of speech “streets of gold.” I take more comfort thinking of a grassy lawn and pretty flowers, but m answer is that I leave the landscape and our relationships of heaven up to God. I think God can help me make my life and perhaps my little corner of this planet better, but the hereafter is totally up to the Almighty.

Some years ago, a family member got quite angry with me because I thought that the names “Adam” and “Eve” were applied to the larger picture of creation. If all humankind began with one man and one woman, then where did their sons find their wives? The verse I love in the creation s tory is that “God made humankind in His own image!” I love the motto I saw once in a lady’s kitchen, “God made me, and he don’t make junk.”

Several years ago, a best seller book was by Rabbi Harold Kushner and was entitled “Why Bad things Happen to Good People.” He tried on several faulty theories but of course, never answered his own question. Either God gives us so much freedom that even God cannot keep us safe, or God is in total control which would make him the author of evil and the motivator of sin and would make God responsible for the consequences of our bad choices. In short, Rabbi Kushner joined all others who have asked the wrong question.

When shooters are fighting guns into a classroom or dance floor, does God stop bullets from hitting some and let others be inflicted with fatal shots? Are we born with an expiration date regardless of how we neglect and abuse our bodies with intemperate drinking, drugs, and obesity? Does God love our generation more because we are living longer than our ancestors? We have people who will drink a six pack of beer or guzzle 100 proof whiskey and drive a car ninety miles an hour to attend a protest against nuclear war! If he hits two professional Hockey players on their bicycles and kills them, should we ask God why? Are we asking the wrong questions?

As to why bad things happen to good people, the old song has the only answer; “We’ll understand it better by and by.” Or as a recent hymn by Natalie Sleeth puts it,

 *“In our end is our beginning, in our time, eternity;*

 *in our doubt is our believing, in our life eternity;*

*In our death a resurrection, and at last a victory*

*unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.”*

Dr. Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, says that a third of his patients are suffering from nothing he can define clinically. They have no diagnosable illness, no known disease, no identifiable mental illness. They are just empty, just unfulfilled, just frustrated. By the measurement of other people, the sufferers may be successful, their lives may be filled with apparent pleasure, they might have plenty of money and a lovely home and what appears to be a good marriage or single life, but they are not happy. David Brooks, writer for New York Times, wrote recently, “Millions of people have lost meaning in their lives.” A half century ago, Dr. E. Stanley Jones wrote, “If people are adrift at sea, they will grab any piece of passing flotsam as a life saver.” We seek the right things in the wrong places.

Victor Frankel was an Austrian psychiatrist who was incarcerated in a Nazi concentration camp in World War II. He saw many people die and many live—all existing behind the same barbed wire, all with emaciated bodies from a “starvation diet,” and all living with no knowledge of what happened to their loved ones. The adversities were relatively equal. He survived personally because he made a constant study of the ones who were alive when the Allied army liberated them and the ones who have died. The answer was not in circumstances, but in finding meaning in one’s life even when the circumstances were like hell itself. The survivors looked beyond the prison. They insisted on believing that the war would end, and they could have a new life. Dr. Frankel spent his own time envisioning what he could do after he was freed. Can we take up our mats where we figuratively speaking lie paralyzed and miserable, and put them under our arms and walk through a threshold of grace and freedom? It depends on which questions we ask to give our lives meaning and purpose.

So, what is the right question? It is a prayer question: “Oh? will you fill the empty spot deep down in my life?” Again, I want to quote Dr. Carl Jung. From his long practice in psychiatry, he concluded that every patient over thirty-five years of age could find answers to their basic life questions with a religious outlook on life.

When I was a college student, I walked one Sunday to a Methodist church near our campus. When they rolled in the guest preacher in a wheelchair and I saw this old, emaciated little man name Rufus Moseley, I thought I had wasted my time. They placed a microphone in his frail little hand, and he began to electrify that congregation, including me. That was over seventy years ago, and I remember his words and my reaction as if it were yesterday.

Mr. Moseley said that he was a Quaker, and that Quakers have a reputation for taking life very seriously but that he had always laughed a lot. He said, “I am frequently asked if it says in the Bible that Jesus laughed. I tell them, ‘No it does not but he fixed me up so I can.” Then he closed his talk by saying that he had spent a lot of research studying the etymology of the religious word, “Hallelujah.” He said, “It is an interjection that rises up out of a happy soul and it means, ‘Hot dog, this is it.’”

If we ask the right questions of life and of God himself, we shall get some answers that are satisfying. When I am down, I find it helpful to sing the refrain that someone added anonymously to an Isaac Watts hymn whose proper title is, “Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed…for Sinners Such As I?”

 *At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light*

 *And the burdens of my heart rolled away.*

 *It was there by faith I received my sight,*

 *And now I am happy all the day.”*

Jesus sees us on our mats of self-pity and worry and the doldrums. His affirmative word is, “Rise up and walk.”

Let’s do it!

Amen