

**“Do You Want to Be Well?”**  
by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)  
Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 5.1-16

July 12, 2015

As we hear today’s reading, I invite you look at a painting. It’s called “The Pool of Bethesda.”



This was painted by Edward Burra in the early 1950s.<sup>1</sup> It’s weird. The style is “surrealist.” It’s not meant to be a snapshot. It’s not saying, “This is what it would have looked like.” But maybe what it felt like, to be at the pool of Bethesda.

Some are ill. Others are trying to help them. Jesus is in the front, with his hands reached out.

Now, hear the Good News of Jesus the Messiah.

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<sup>1</sup> For background about Burra, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_Burra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Burra) and [www.methodist.org.uk/static/artcollection/mccmca\\_hoyland\\_critique\\_0509.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/static/artcollection/mccmca_hoyland_critique_0509.pdf).

After this there was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethesda. It had five covered porches, and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there. A certain man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, Jesus asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

The sick man answered him, "Sir, I don't have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I'm trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me."

John 5.1-7

Adapted from the Common English Bible

We will continue with that account in a bit. But first, ask yourself where you are in this story. Am I on the outside, watching in unfold? Am I one of those near the pool, waiting for healing? Am I someone who is helping the sick into the water?

Back to Edward Burra's painting. I think it's ugly. I think he meant it to be ugly. For his whole life, he struggled with poor health. He knew what it is to be unwell. It's ugly.

Someone who saw the painting in a gallery, and who had been hospitalized for mental health concerns, said it feels just like that.<sup>2</sup> Ugly.

This does not need to be just about personal health. Burra had seen the Spanish Civil War. He'd lived the London Blitz. A book about Burra's art is called, World Out of Joint.<sup>3</sup> He'd experience the ugly dislocation of our unwell world. So much ugliness . . . sick bodies, sick minds, sick families, sick churches, sick institutions, sick corporations, sick societies, sick creation, sick souls, sick world.

It seems that pool went by different names.<sup>4</sup> One was *Bethesda*. It means "House of Mercy." People went there for mercy. They needed grace. They needed healing. Every so often, the water started bubbling up. They said an angel was stirring it, and if you were the first in when it started, you were cured.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> [www.methodist.org.uk/media/829954/dd-explore-devotion-praying-with-art-0313.pdf](http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/829954/dd-explore-devotion-praying-with-art-0313.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Bryan Robertson, World Out of Joint: The Work of Edward Burra (Boston: E. P. Dutton, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Various manuscripts attest to three names for the pool. Beth-zatha is the one chosen by the majority of scholars on the United Bible Society's Greek New Testament Committee, and used by the NRSV and NET translations. Beth-esda ("House of *Hesed*," "House of Mercy") also has manuscript support, and is used in the KJV, NASB, ESV and NIV. The third name, Beth-saida ("House of the Fisherman"), while used in the CEB, might result from confusion with a likewise-named site in Galilee. See Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 302.

<sup>5</sup> Earlier translations follow some manuscripts and include this (at the end of v.3 and as v.4): ". . . *waiting for the stirring of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well from whatever disease*

Bethesda was outside the city walls. It was not one of those places in travel guides or on tourist maps. It was not one of the sights people were drawn to see. It was ugly. People went up to the Temple. It was beautiful, glorious, majestic. It was a place of God's presence and power.

Except Jesus, the Son of God, goes down to the pool. The ugliness of illness is on full display. He goes where people need help.<sup>6</sup> That Bethesda promised mercy, but just to those who could get in first. When Jesus went there, Mercy showed up in person. Especially for those who couldn't get in.

## II

Here's another painting of the scene, by Dinah Roe Kendall. She came from a family of artists, and after serving as a nurse in the War, she went to art school. There, she became a Christian. She's raised five children, one of whom died in a car accident when he was seventeen.<sup>7</sup> She painted this in 2000, when she was 77.



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*that person had.*" Modern translations follow more reliable manuscripts and omit this explanation. It was probably added by later scribes as background to what was happening at the pool. While the likelihood is that it was not in the original text of the Gospel of John, it might reflect a reliable tradition. See Bruner, 303, and N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 55.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pool\\_of\\_Bethesda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pool_of_Bethesda)

<sup>7</sup> See [www.canterburydiocese.org/media/outlook/winter2014\\_dinahroekendall.pdf](http://www.canterburydiocese.org/media/outlook/winter2014_dinahroekendall.pdf) and [www.prweb.com/releases/2006/01/prweb335250.htm](http://www.prweb.com/releases/2006/01/prweb335250.htm)

Jesus comes to the pool and he finds Harry there. (We don't know the man's name, so I'll call him "Harry.") Jesus meets Harry during one of the annual festivals. Like other Jews, Jesus has made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for it. We don't know which festival. Does it matter? Harry will not be celebrating. Folks heading off in their Sunday-best will not see him. He will be where he always is. By the pool. Not moving.

Poolside Harry has been there 38 years. No cure. He never makes it to the water in time.

Poolside Harry is paralyzed. No wheelchairs back then. No rehab. No special parking. That wouldn't matter here anyway. At Bethesda, everyone needs help.

But no one was helping Harry. At least, that is what he tells Jesus.

*"I've got no one to help me."*

*"Do you want to get well?"* Jesus asks.

Why wouldn't he?

Well, he's "Poolside Harry." He's been that for almost 40 years! That's who he has become. After you've lived in the ugliness long enough, it becomes part of who you are. You adapt. You fit to it. You cannot imagine anything else. You hate the ugliness. Sickness is not your friend. But you might make a truce with that familiar enemy, and learn to live together.

Will you miss it, when it's gone?

*"Do you want to get well?"*

Again, this is not just about personal illness. We get quite used to any sort of sickness. Climate change, the legacy Residential Schools, clothing made by cheap labour, millions of refugees, and so on. Of course, I want these problems solved. . . . Except . . . am I willing to be changed myself: how I act, what I do, who I am?

*"Do you want to get well?"*

III

One more painting. This one has a more classical style. It's by Carl Bloch, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Danish painter.<sup>8</sup>



Let's hear more of the Good News.

Jesus said to the man, "Get up! Pick up your mat. Walk."  
Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked.

John 5:8-9a

Adapted from the Common English Bible

"Get up!" "Walk!" Simple commands. "Get up!" "Walk!" Nothing "religious," flashy, or majestic.<sup>9</sup> No hocus pocus. No big show.

And Harry was well.

The pool had not done it. Not for 38 years. Jesus does it.

It requires no desire on Harry's part, nor any ability. There is no competition to see who gets there first. Jesus does it all.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl\\_Bloch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Bloch)

<sup>9</sup> Bruner, 298.

Does Harry have faith in Jesus? Well, later we learn he had now idea who it was who healed him.<sup>10</sup>

*“Get up!” “Walk!”*

And Harry was well.

In Bloch’s painting, we can barely see Harry. Just his legs are in the light . . . his paralyzed legs. That’s all we can easily see of Harry. The rest of him is under his blanket.

Jesus pulls back the blanket.

*“Get up.”* That’s a resurrection word.<sup>11</sup> Jesus gets us up with these foretastes of resurrection. He is bringing new life. He is inaugurating a new creation, by wiping away whatever makes for ugliness, arresting whatever steals wellness, defanging the sting of death.

For all of us, this is very personal. For all of us, this is more than personal. Jesus is giving foretastes of resurrection wherever healing happens in bodies, minds, families, churches, institutions, corporations, societies, souls, creation—anywhere in God’s world.

*“All things were made through [Jesus], and without [Jesus] was not any thing made that was made. In [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of humankind.”<sup>12</sup>*

Jesus pulls back the blanket so he can see Harry. And so Harry can see the light.

In Jesus, new life is here. In Jesus, new creation is happening. Jesus is bursting it in, in all sorts of places where wellness is needed, and in all sorts of ways.

#### IV

I skimmed over one part of Jesus’ command to Harry. *“Get up. Pick up your mat. Walk.”* The “pick up your mat” part causes all sorts of problems.

Here’s the end of today’s reading:

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<sup>10</sup> John 5.12-13.

<sup>11</sup> The Greek word that lies behind that command, *egeire*, is often used for resurrection. Wright, 57.

<sup>12</sup> John 1.3-4.

Now that day was the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, "It's the Sabbath; you aren't allowed to carry your mat." He answered, "The man who healed me said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'" They questioned him, "Who is this man who said to you, 'Pick it up and walk'?" The man who had been cured didn't know who it was, because Jesus had slipped away from the crowd gathered there.

Later Jesus found him in the temple and said, "See! You have been made well. Don't sin anymore in case something worse happens to you." The man went and told the good news to the Jewish leaders that Jesus was the man who had made him well. As a result, the Jewish leaders were out to get Jesus, since he had done these things on the Sabbath.

John 5.9b-16

Adapted from the Common English Bible

When Jesus is working, controversy comes. He provokes it.<sup>13</sup>

Sometimes, we don't want to be well.

Sometimes, we grow quite concerned when healing happens.

We'll pick up on that conversation, next week.

In the meantime, please consider Jesus' question: "*Do you want to get well?*" He is asking you. Is he asking about an unwellness within you? Around you?

*"Do you want to get well?"*

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<sup>13</sup> Dale Bruner asks, rightly I believe,

*Why did Jesus seem so singlemindedly to do so many of his healings on the Sabbath? The Jewish people were and are as humane as others, and if a sickness was life-threatening they allowed and still allow medical intervention on the Sabbath. They simply and sensibly asked only that if a sickness or a problem was not life-threatening, please, in order to honor God and his day of rest, postpone work on the sickness or problem for just a few hours. This seems thoughtful. Why does Jesus appear to flaunt this thoughtfulness?* Bruner, 299.