

The Price of Transformation

John 5:2-9a and Isaiah 43:19

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk (John 5:2-9a, NRSV).

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert (Isaiah 43:19, NRSV).

You and I pray for transformation. We pray for God to change other people and pray for God to change us. We ask God to give a conversion experience to that teenager, Michelle, who won't have anything to do with Christian faith. We implore God to take away the breast cancer in Sam's sister, Laura. We beseech God to make Jim realize that he drinks so much Wild Turkey Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey that he needs a detox program. We beg God to stop those rabid religious terrorists in the Middle East and change them into quiet lovers of peace.

We also ask God to change us. In prayer we claim, maybe, that we want to be healed of the hate we feel for the people across the street who will not keep their yard looking nice, or to be healed of the anger that explodes inside us whenever that kid next door broadcasts his rock music through the neighborhood. In prayer we ask, maybe, for a better relationship with our parents or our spouse or our children. We insist, maybe, that we want to become intimate with God, to feel God's soft love washing over our shoulders, to feel God's holy fire burning blue and hot inside us.

It may be, however, that you and I do not know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26), that our prayers are too superficial, too glib. We make transformation sound as easy as frying hamburgers for lunch, but forget that in order for raw hamburger to be changed into well done, it first must be fried over excruciating heat. Change comes at a price.

Jesus once walked up to an invalid lying beside a pool in Jerusalem, stared down at him, and asked what sounds like a stupid question: “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6). I know many people with some kind of illness, and all of them, I think, would answer “yes!” to that question. If there's anything sick people want, it's usually wellness. This particular man lying by

the pool has been sick for thirty-eight years. Can you imagine what it would be like to be sick for thirty-eight years? I have a hard time wrapping my brain around the reality of thirty-eight years, let alone being sick for that long. Thirty-eight years ago I was a child of six, getting ready to start first grade. Thirty-eight years ago Lyndon Johnson was president, we were sending more soldiers to die in Vietnam, and the Voting Rights Act was passed. Thirty-eight years ago *The Sound of Music* was the number one box-office hit, and Ford manufactured the first Mustangs. From then until now, an invalid? I have an equally hard time imagining what it would be like to be sick for the next thirty-eight years. Thirty-eight years from now I will be an old man of eighty-two—if I live that long.

In thirty-eight years we might get used to being sick. After thirty-eight years we might find it ordinary to walk with crutches, dragging that shriveled leg of ours along the ground, taking twice as long to get somewhere as a person without crutches. After thirty-eight years the crutches seem permanently attached to our body. After thirty-eight years our self-identity becomes wrapped up in those crutches and in that shriveled leg: I am disabled. I am impaired. I am invalid.

After a while our self-identity becomes so attached to the very thing we want to be healed of that we cannot bear to give it up. A young man once came to Jesus and asked what he had to do to get the transformation of eternal life. Jesus looked deeply into the heart of this particular young man and replied: if you really do want that transformation, then sell all your over-privileged stuff—your camels and scrolls and fancy Italian wines and house on the Mediterranean and whatever else you’ve become attached to—sell it all, give the money to the under-privileged, and then follow me (Mark 10:17-22). There it is: Jesus offering perhaps the most sought-after transformation anyone can imagine: the 24-carat gift of living forever. And what does this young man do? He walks away. Why? Because his self-identity is so wrapped up in those camels and fancy Italian wines that he cannot imagine what it would be like to live without them. He wants to live forever, yes; but the price of getting there seems too great.

The question Jesus asks is therefore not at all stupid, but profoundly wise: Do you *really* want to be well? Can you dare to imagine what life could be like without those crutches, to have a leg made whole and strong? Are you able to think yourself into a different world where you can run and jump and dance?

The man lying by the pool doesn't seem to hear the question beneath the question. He doesn't even know who the person is standing over him, offering this chance to enter a world of alternative possibility. "Sir," the man replies, "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way [to the water], someone else steps down ahead of me" (John 5:7). So I never get healed. I want to be. I try to be. But I'm not fast enough, not strong enough.

This, apparently, is a good enough answer for Jesus. He says, "Stand up, take your mat and walk" (John 5:8). Run. Jump. Dance. And enter a new world.

It doesn't take long for the man to begin paying a price for his transformation. Within a matter of minutes, his rolled-up mat tucked under his arm, he meets some authorities out on the street who stop him "What are you doing breaking Sabbath laws?" they demand. "You're not supposed to be carrying that mat on the Sabbath!"

"Sorry, but the man who just healed me told me to carry it. So I am."

"What! Somebody healed you on the Sabbath? That's breaking another law!" So it turns out that the price he pays for transformation is conflict with the religious police.

Of course none of us ever knows ahead of time what price we will pay for transformation. When we agree to marry someone, do we ever know how this covenant will change us, and what it may cost us to make those changes? When we choose a career, do we ever know how it will affect us, and what it may exact from us? When we decide to follow Jesus for as long as we shall live, no matter what the cost of discipleship might be, do we ever know the price we may eventually end up paying? No.

At the end of the gospel of John, Jesus has another conversation about the price of transformation, this time with Peter. It's the final conversation in the book, the last verbal exchange between Jesus and any human being. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks Peter. "Lord, you know . . . I love you" (John 21:17). In response to this commitment of love, Jesus then says this:

Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go (John 21:18).

Even though we do not know everything Jesus means by this statement, he is clearly warning Peter that someday in the future Peter will be martyred. How Peter will be martyred

remains to be seen; but the price he will pay for loving Jesus is dying a death he will not want to die, going to a place he will not want to go. To be transformed, Peter will spend his life.

If your life is like mine, then circumstances may tie any number of belts around your waist, pulling you into transformations you would rather not experience. You open the letter with your SAT or GRE scores and die to the dream of going to Harvard. The police arrest your daughter for possessing cocaine, and you die to the goal of having a perfect home with perfect children. The boss fires you, a burglar ransacks your bedroom, or a plane purposefully crashes into a tower, and you die to the illusion that you are secure. A doctor says you have cancer, and suddenly you realize you may not even live to be fifty.

All this talk of dying may sound morbid to our ears until we remember who is speaking to Peter: it is Jesus, but at a peculiar moment in his life. The Jesus who speaks here is not the Jesus who sweated temptations in the hot Palestinian wilderness for forty days (Mark 1:12-13); this is not the Jesus who sweated blood on the Mount of Olives, madly praying for some way to change the world other than dying for it (Luke 22:39-44); this is not the Jesus nailed on wood who screamed, "God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, paraphrased).

No, the Jesus who speaks at the end of John's gospel has allowed all these deaths to pass through him. This is the Jesus whom death has touched so completely there is nothing left for it to touch. Death has passed all the way through this Jesus, leaving only life.

I know a woman who has died again and again. Decades ago her husband had an affair with another woman and then asked for divorce. One son turned schizophrenic, while another died from a heart attack. She lost most hearing in one of her ears, and a few years later found out that cancer is eating her bones. Yet in spite of it all, or more likely because of it all, God has sprung up a new thing in her, granting an intimacy that she never experienced before. God, whom she used to glimpse only occasionally on some distant mountain, now lives closer than her own breathing. Prayer, once an exercise of shooting words into the silence, now flows like liquid from her to God and God to her while she washes dishes, waters her plants, and walks the neighborhood. The communication surges in sighs and feelings, thoughts and images too deep for words. And her eyes dance.

So what do you think? Do you want to be changed?