

Opened Hearts and Unstuck Lives

Readings: Acts 16:9-15 and John 5:1-9

Introduction: Are You Feeling Stuck?

Have you ever felt stuck? I don't mean a baffled kind of stuck, for example, with not knowing how to answer a maths question, or something like that. But stuck in a fixed or trapped sort of way.

I can think of two or three occasions when I was stuck. One of them, I was perhaps 12 or 13, occurred in a PE lesson at school. We were to run 100m, but from a seated position; we were sitting on the grass with our legs crossed. The idea was that on the start command, "On your marks. Set. Go" we would get up by rocking forward, or something like that, without using our hands, and race down the track.

Do you need me to tell you what happened? Yes? Okay I was stuck, still trying to get up when everybody else had finished the race. I'm sure that PE teachers designed these things for maximum embarrassment. I tried it again last week, and I still can't do it!

Seriously, though, have you ever felt stuck? Not just physically, but stuck in life – stuck in a situation or pattern, a bad habit perhaps, or an unhealthy way of thinking? Maybe you've known what you *should* do, but you just haven't been able to move toward it. Or maybe something has happened that's out of your control, and it's left you feeling powerless, discombobulated.

Today we're given two stories of people who experienced the life-changing power of Jesus. And while they seem very different on the surface, both stories invite us to notice, first, how God meets people where they are, and second, how we respond when God's grace reaches out to us.

The Man at the Pool: A Surprising Question

Let's start at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem.

In AD70 the Sheep Gate was destroyed by the Romans at their destruction of Jerusalem. The pool was abandoned or fell into disrepair and eventually buried below new developments. Since the late 19th century archaeologists have now revealed a rectangular pool with five porticos. It was a real place and I imagine Jesus visiting it with his parents when they regularly came to Jerusalem, from Galilee, through the Sheep Gate at the NE corner of Jerusalem, and close to the Temple.

We're told that at the pool lies a man who has been unwell for 38 years. To the first century Jewish listeners, 38 years would likely have triggered a connection with the wilderness generation. After Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt they wandered in the desert for 38 years – a period of stuckness, unfilled promise, judgement and waiting. 38 wasn't just a sad statistic.

The man, we don't know his name. We don't know what his condition is, but we do know that he needed help, and his condition has lasted a long time. Perhaps too long for him to believe anything could ever change.

Then Jesus shows up and asks what may appear to be a strange question:

“Do you want to be made well?”

It sounds almost harsh. Of course he wants to be healed... doesn't he? But Jesus seems to be doing more than offering a miracle – he's probing something deeper.

I wonder, had the man become so used to his limitations or his disappointments that he can no longer imagine anything different? Have they become part of his identity?

“Do you want to be made well?”

When the man responds, he doesn't answer the question with a “Yes!” Instead, he gives an excuse, “Sir, no one will help me into the water, someone always gets there first.” He's locked in the logic of *why change isn't possible*. The man is stuck on his mat beside the pool of false hope.

Yet, Jesus heals him. Jesus doesn't lay hands on him, pray over him, or do anything ceremonial. Just a simple instruction: *“Stand up, take your mat and walk.”*

And the healing happens when the man acts in response to those words: he trusts enough to move. “At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.”

Lydia by the River: A Heart Opened

Now let's shift scenes. Paul has been travelling, likely for several weeks, trying to discern where God is calling him next. In a vision he's directed to Macedonia – what we now know as northern Greece. It's a pivotal moment in the spread and growth of the early church: the gospel is crossing into Europe.

[This passage is sometimes referred to as one of the “we” passages. The author of Acts, Luke, has joined Paul on his travels.]

After a sea crossing and more walking, Paul and his companions arrive in Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city in the district of Macedonia. Travelling would have been tiring in those days; no wonder they needed a few days to rest.

On the Sabbath they go outside the city, to the river, in search of a place of prayer. There they meet a group of women, and one of them – Lydia – stands out. She's a successful businesswoman, a worshipper of God, a seeker. And we're told this beautiful line:

“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”

She responds immediately. She and her household are baptized, and she offers hospitality – her home becomes the base for the church in that city. It is to this new church that Paul later writes his letter to the Philippians.

(The theologian, Paula Gooder, has written a lovely book about Lydia and what it would have been like in Philippi, as Christians to live under Roman rule.)

Two Encounters, Two Responses

Here's what I find striking: both stories show us how God takes the initiative. Jesus finds the man at the pool. The Holy Spirit leads Paul to Lydia. But the responses of the man and Lydia are quite different.

The man is healed, but his story ends with a bit of a question mark. He shows no sign of faith or gratitude. In fact, when questioned later, he points the authorities toward Jesus. This led to the Jewish authorities starting to persecute Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath.

Lydia's response is open-hearted, generous, and immediate. She receives the word, welcomes Paul and his travelling companions, and becomes a leader in the early Church.

The gospel reaches both. But only one allows it to reshape her life.

The Risen Christ Still Moves

These stories remind us that the risen Christ is still at work – healing, calling, redirecting, restoring. But also, that his grace calls for a response.

Not everyone responds the same way. Some stay stuck. Others open their hearts. And that's where today's readings meet *us*.

What About Us?

So, let me ask gently: Where might you be feeling stuck?

Are there places in your life – maybe in your faith, your relationships, your sense of purpose, your habits – where Jesus might be asking, *"Do you want to be made well?"*

And at the same time, where might God be opening new doors for you? Maybe not dramatically, but quietly. Like Lydia by the river – already praying, already attentive – and just waiting for the next step.

Perhaps these stories also touch something tender in us.

Some of us know what it is to live with illness – this may include chronic pain, limited mobility, conditions that don't go away. Some of us are waiting for a diagnosis. Or we may be watching someone we love go through it. Or it may be something different, a bad habit perhaps, or an unhealthy way of thinking.

The man at the pool had been there for 38 years. Jesus saw him. He *really saw him* – his body, his pain, his discouragement. And Jesus met him with healing.

We still believe Jesus can heal. We believe his compassion hasn't changed. But we also know that healing doesn't always come in the way or time we hope for.

So, if you're carrying something today – whether in your body, your mind, or your spirit – I want to say: you are not forgotten. You are seen. You are loved. And you can still bring your need to Jesus. Even if your faith feels faint or non-existent.

And if it helps, you don't have to carry that prayer alone. If you'd like someone to pray with you – quietly, simply – there are people here who would be glad to do that with you after the service. Or perhaps at the Wednesday mid-day Holy Communion.

God doesn't force healing or faith or transformation on anyone. But God's grace is always reaching out to us. And sometimes, all we're asked to do is be willing.

Don't be like the man by the pool, making excuses.

So let's be willing to let go of the old story, pick up our mat and walk. Let's be willing to open our hearts.

Closing Prayer

Let's pray:

Risen Lord Jesus, you come to us in our stuck places,
in our routines, our wounds, our fears and our tears.
You offer healing, direction, new life.
Free us like you freed the man by the pool.
Open our hearts like you opened Lydia's.
And help us to respond – not only with belief,
but with the willingness to walk, to listen, and to follow.

Amen.

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