

“The Want-to Factor” (John 5:1-9)

Easter 6, May 9, 2010

When I was 12 or 13, I got the idea: *Wouldn't it be fun to spend time with my grandparents during the summer?* That was fine with them. The trouble was: they lived 500 miles away. But my parents told me that if I paid for half the flight, they would pay for the rest – which was a pretty good deal – in theory. Back then, commuter flights between L.A. and Oakland were dirt cheap, and with my little job passing out flyers for Ready Realty, I could easily earn the money. It was just that...I didn't like to save money. At that age, as soon as I got paid, I wanted to spend, spend, spend. So you can guess what happened. Winter became Spring; hadn't saved much. Then school was almost over; still hadn't saved much. That's when my parents decided to intervene.

Now, at such times, there were two basic approaches in our home. The “Dad-approach” was direct: *Do this! Don't do that!* The “Mom-approach” was more indirect. It went like this. One day I was griping about never having any money. Mom just listened. So I went on and on about how I wished I could buy this and I wished I could buy that, but no! I had to save up for my trip. Still, mom just listened. In fact, she pretty much just listened until I ran out of things to whine about. Then she said, *“Gee, honey, I'm sorry you feel that way. If you don't want to visit Grandma and Grandpa, you don't have to.”* I just looked at her. What was that supposed to mean? I was looking forward to the trip! So she went a step further. *“Do you want to visit Grandma and Grandpa?”* “Of course!” I said. Then she just looked at me. And you know the look! The kind that says: *Really? Are you sure?* That's when reality sank in. Did I want to visit Grandma and Grandpa? Yes! Did I want it more than I wanted to spend, spend, spend on stupid stuff? Yes! *“Then you know what you need to do,”* Mom said – which was true. I needed to start saving – and from that moment on, I did.

Now, I'll be honest. At the time, I resented mom asking me this question. Did I want to visit Grandma and Grandpa?! Looking back, though, I see her wisdom...and her strategy. Mom didn't ask the question for her sake. She already knew the answer. Mom asked the question for my sake – to help me put things in the right perspective. *What do you really want? And how badly do you want it?* Once that was clear, I was off and running; the “*want-to factor*” kicked in! And that's usually the case in life. Rarely does our heart's desire fall into our lap. Nor does anyone wave a magic wand. Usually, we have to want something badly enough to pursue it. If we're not clear what we want, we won't get far. If we aren't willing to pursue it, we won't get far. But if we know what we want and want it badly enough to work for it, strive for it, even sacrifice for it, chances are very good we will reach our goal. So much depends on the “*want-to factor.*”

So why do I remember this today? Not just because it's Mother's Day. More, because of what I see in today's Gospel. When talking to others, Jesus usually took the “Dad-approach.” *Do this! Don't do that!* But in this case, He's taking the “Mom-approach.” And that's just rare enough to make us wonder why. What's the point? And what's the message here? So let's take a closer look.

We're in Jerusalem at the Pool of Beth-zatha. We see many sick people here – blind, lame, paralyzed. And why have they come? In hopes of a miraculous cure. You see, it's believed that from time to time an angel comes down to stir up the water, and whoever gets in the pool first will be healed. Now, when you're sick, it's not easy to get there first, so some of the folks have been waiting their turn for quite a while. In fact, one man's been here for 38 years. And as Jesus arrives, what does He do? He walks right up to this man – the one who's been here for 38 years – and He asks, **“Do you want to be made well?”**

Now, my first thought is: *What kind of a question is that?!* **“Do you want to be made well?!”** Why else would the man be here? Why else would he have waited for 38 years? But when the man just says, **“I have no one to put me into the pool; when the water is stirred up...someone”** always **“steps down ahead of me”** – well then, I think: *What kind of an answer is that?!* I don't want to judge, but honestly, doesn't it strike you as strange that, in the course of 38 years, this man couldn't figure out some way to get to the pool first? I mean, he must have had someone looking out for him – someone to feed him, clothe him, help him with other needs. How else would he have survived all these years? And that aside, couldn't he have sat on the edge of the pool, waited for the bubbling to start, and then pushed himself in? To me, something's missing in this answer. And not to put too fine a point on it, what seems to be missing is the *“want-to factor.”* I'll bet the man had it when he first came to Beth-zatha. I'll bet he had it for a long, long time. But after repeated disappointments, I'll bet he just got to the point where he lost hope – lost hope and finally gave up trying.

You know, that's not uncommon – even with religious people. You get discouraged. You lose focus. After a while, you stop trying. You just put up with the situation, miserable as it is. You just accept the unacceptable, telling yourself things could be worse. And that may well be what this man has done – right up to the moment Jesus asks him, **“Do you want to be made well?”**

As ones who know Jesus, we know He does not ask this for His own sake. He already knows the answer. Jesus asks this for the man's sake – to help him put things in the right perspective. *What do you really want? And how badly do you want it?* What the man says reflects his years of accepting the unacceptable. **“I have no one to put me into the pool... someone”** always **“steps down ahead of me.”** But deep down inside, you know something more has to be bubbling up to the surface! The hopes he had of someday being healed! The yearning he had for wholeness! The desire he had for a real life – away from this pool; away from this rut he's been stuck in! **“Do you want to be made well?”** Perhaps this is the first time in years that he's even thought about that! And yes, he does! More than anything, He does! He wants to be made well!

And even as he realizes this, Jesus gives him the chance he's been waiting for. He says, **“Stand up, take your mat, and walk.”** Can you imagine the man's inner struggle? On the one hand, he's felt so much despair for so long. Why believe anything could change now? On the other hand, he feels such yearning,

such desire to be healed! And in fact, that's the stronger emotion. He wants more! He wants change! The "want-to-factor" is kicking in! But Jesus will not drop a miracle in his lap or wave a magic wand. If the man wants to be made well, he has to want it badly enough to trust Jesus, take Him at His Word. So the man musters his courage and tries to stand up. It works! Then he takes a few tentative steps. That works, too! After 38 years of waiting, this man is finally healed! And make no mistake: it is Jesus who has done the miracle. But let's also be clear: it would not have happened without the "want-to factor."

Today, some 2,000 years later, there is a valuable lesson for us here. It's not a lesson about miracles *per se*. I'm not going to tell anyone: *If you just want to be healed badly enough, it will happen.* I'm not Jesus. I have no right to make such a promise. Healing is up to God. But this is what I am going to tell you: there are a lot of things we put up with in life that we can change if we want to. God will help us do it. But He's not going to drop solutions in our laps or wave a magic wand. What's needed is the "want-to factor."

Let me share an example. A couple I know was very upset after their first appointment with a marriage counselor. "Do you know what she asked? She asked us, 'What makes you think your marriage is worth saving?' Imagine! And she wouldn't even let us answer the question. She just told us to think about it until our next session." Well, they did think about it, and they came up with all kinds of reasons why their marriage was worth saving. They told the counselor they had problems, sure, but they loved each other, and they wanted to make things work better. So then the counselor asked them, "How *badly* do you want things to work better?" And again, she wouldn't let them answer right away. They were to think about *that* until the next session.

Do you see the "Mom-approach" here? The problem in this marriage – as is often the case – was that husband and wife had lost perspective. Something would come up and they'd fight about it. Or they wouldn't fight about it; they'd just fume and hold a grudge. In the back of their minds, they knew better. They knew they'd fallen into unhealthy patterns, that neither was trying as hard as they should, that it was easier to blame the other...and dredge up old stuff...and play the martyr...and so on. They were stuck in a rut and it was wrecking their marriage! So what was the counselor to do? Drop a solution in their lap? Wave a magic wand? That wouldn't work! What they needed was the "want-to factor." The couple had to *want to* save their marriage – badly enough to work at it and make some uncomfortable changes. Which they finally did. Mind you, things didn't change overnight, but things did change over time. The marriage did heal and grow stronger. And what made the difference? The "want-to factor."

Of course, it can work the other way, too. Years ago, I was asked to consult with a declining congregation that said it wanted to grow. It was out in the San Fernando Valley. I was very upfront with the people. There are many positive sides to growth. You're able to do more – with worship, music, education, youth.

You're able to offer more programs. You're able to reach people others aren't reaching. You're able to have a bigger impact on the community. But there are downsides, too. There's no way you can know everyone. Things don't just happen. Individual members don't have as much control. The pastor will have less time to just shoot the breeze. "Yes, yes!" the people said. "*We understand all that, and we're willing to pay the price! We really want to grow!*" So we put some plans into action, and this church started to grow. It isn't actually that hard. But before too long, guess what? They started to lose perspective. Then the murmuring started. "*I don't know everyone anymore.*" "*Those new people are interfering with the way we've always done things.*" "*Pastor is never around when I drop by.*" You get the picture. And as you might guess, things soon started sliding downhill again. "*Guess the plans didn't work,*" some said. "*Guess this church isn't able to grow,*" said others. But that wasn't it. God was ready, willing, and able to bless that church. It could have grown tremendously. There were plenty of opportunities all around them. Only one thing was lacking: the "*want-to factor.*"

So you see what I mean. It can work either way. And are there exceptions? Sure. But let's not miss the point. And to make sure we don't, let me tell a story on myself. Years ago, I was facing some tough challenges in my ministry, so I went and talked to an older pastor. I was so discouraged! I told him, "Maybe I just don't have enough faith." He asked, "Have you stopped believing you're pursuing God's will?" "No." Have you stopped believing God is able to help you with this challenge?" "No." "Then it's not faith you lack. It's desire." "What do you mean?" I asked. He said, "Do you want to overcome this challenge?" "Yes." "You *really* want to overcome it?" "Of course." "How badly? Enough to put up with all these problems? Enough to pour in more time and energy? Enough to change how you're doing things, even make some sacrifices? Enough to wait on God's timing and not give up?" You can imagine the look on my face. But I got the point. What I needed was the "*want-to factor.*"

And really, this point applies to many sides of life – whether we're talking about individual challenges, personal growth, our relationships, even our mission as a church. Faith is essential – faith that, with God's help, we can change, we can improve, we can overcome. But how can faith function without desire? That's where the rubber meets the road. We need the "*want-to factor.*"

So this is the message we take home with us today. And what will we do with it? Seeing how it's Mother's Day, I'm not going to end this sermon with the "Dad-approach." *Do this! Don't do that!* We'll take the "Mom-approach" instead. Just as Jesus asked the man, "**Do you want to be made well?**" – let's think about the challenges in our own life: *What do I want? What do I want to change, improve, overcome? And how badly do I want it? Enough to do whatever's required?* If something is God's will for us, His grace will be sufficient; His power will be made perfect in our weakness. That side is covered. But there is still something needed from us: the "*want-to factor.*" Amen.