After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, 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. Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been cured, “It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.” But he answered them, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your mat and walk.’” They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take it up and walk?’” Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had disappeared in the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you.” The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath.
Do You Want to be Made Well?

The story of Jesus’ healing at Bethzatha (or Bethesda) is part of a larger story in John of Jesus’ work on the Sabbath, of the hatred it kindles, and of Jesus’ claims to authority and divinity.

I’ve long been intrigued by Jesus’ question of the man at the edge of the pool: “Do you want to be made well?” On first hearing it, we twitch. Why would our Savior ask this poor man such a question? After all, why is the man at the pool? Bethesda is known for just one thing. Healing.

“Do you want to be made well?”

But Jesus wouldn’t ask a dumb question, so we need to think. Here’s a man in front of him who hasn’t walked in thirty-eight years. Maybe Jesus sees a man who is used to his condition. It’s part of who he is. He can’t imagine life any other way. Maybe this man’s answer to Jesus’ question would have been perfectly ambivalent—the same as the answer of an addict: Yes and no. Could that be the real reason this man had always lost the race to the pool?

Jesus’ question still haunts us. Do you want your old self to die? Do you want to “clean the inside of the cup”? Would you like to lose the anger you’re clinging to? Do you want to be made well?

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.