

Made Whole

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"A shy, quiet person." These are the words I used to use to describe myself. In and of themselves there's nothing wrong with these words. Indeed, there's nothing wrong with being a shy and quiet person. The issue I seek to raise is not so much one of specific words, but how who we say we are impacts not only our life narrative but its potential trajectory as well.

Take, for instance the story of the man at the pool of Bethesda. I can almost picture the scene...a lovely pool with five porticoes where people...people with various ailments and diseases, many chronic, have gathered. Each of them hopes for chance to enter the pool at just the right time...when the water is stirred up...and be healed.

And then there's this man...he's been sick for thirty-eight years...thirty-eight years! Now he's tried to get to the pool too...but someone always seems to get in the way.

Imagine how frustrated...angry...or discouraged this man must be. I can even picture him shaking his fist at the heavens and asking his god, "Why?" Reading the story, I have great empathy for this man...he is stuck...I imagine most of us can relate in some way to his pain or frustration.

So along comes Jesus, who upon seeing this man lying there asks, "Do you want to be made well?" Surprisingly, rather than answering yes, the man tells Jesus why he can't get to the pool. "I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up... when I try to get there myself, someone else gets there first." We can summarize the man's response to Jesus' question as, "I can't." I can't be made well because...and then he lists his reasons. This is the man's story, the life narrative he's woven around his self-understanding as a sick and now presumably, helpless man. It has become the only lens through which he sees himself.

This self-understanding and the story that supports it has limited this man's engagement with life for thirty-eight years...it has kept him confined in a prison of his own making so impenetrable that when Jesus comes along and asks him, "Do you want to be made well...or as it is sometimes translated, "Do you want to be made whole?", he can't even imagine how such a thing would be possible.

And then something amazing happens. Jesus, undeterred by the man's excuses or self-doubt and, without laying a hand on him, says "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Upon hearing this, the man, so the story goes, was made well...made whole, and took up his mat and began to walk.

So what happened? What was it that made the man whole and thus able to take up his mat and walk...to start life anew?

Let's return to my own story for a moment...a story that begins with my self-description as a shy and quiet person. I never really gave this way of describing myself much thought until I first heard or sensed my call to ministry.

I remember the day like it was yesterday.

I was sitting in church, listening to my minister preach about what I do not remember, when suddenly I felt something like a shiver inside. I don't know how, but I knew in that moment it was a call to ministry. Almost immediately, my mind went into panic mode...as I continued to watch and listen to my minister a rapidly self-generated list of very convincing reasons why I could never be a minister emerged...I don't have the right education and breadth of knowledge...I'm afraid of public speaking...I don't have the money...Ministers don't make enough money....It will take too long...and perhaps most absurd...I can't risk it at my age (I was in my thirties).

Whew! that was close! Thank God for all those "good" excuses, I might have become me without those. That was the end of that, or so I thought.

As it turns out, a call to ministry is not that easily dissuaded by such excuses. More plainly put, it nagged and picked at me day and night until I went to see my minister about maybe, possibly, but probably hopefully not having a call to ministry that I quickly followed with the list of reasons named earlier with I'm sure a few more added in for dramatic effect. My minister's response was simple and, at the time, perplexing, "Take time to listen to this call."

"Listen? I wondered... Listen for what?"

Before I left her office, my minister handed me a book entitled "Let Your Life Speak" by Parker Palmer. And so I left and began trying to listen...even though I wasn't initially sure what I was listening for. Then, one day, I decided to crack open the book my minister had given me. The first chapter began with a poem by William Stafford called "Ask Me" which includes this line, "ask me if what I have done is my life."

It was then that I realized that it was not a "what" or "why" I needed to listen for, but "who".. "who am I" and is this "I" living my life or someone else's?

These are vital spiritual questions...questions which can help move us from a self identity of disempowerment and the accompanying narrative we craft to support it, to one of empowerment... from an experience as a fragmented, even broken, self to a life more in tune and accepting of our wholeness.

For the man at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus' questions, "Do you want to be made well (whole)? is a spiritual one. When the man responds with excuses, Jesus does not offer to carry the man to the pool or clear his path to the healing waters. Instead, Jesus tells him, "Take up your mat and walk," which is another way of saying, you are not your illness...there is a part of you that is not helpless...a part of you that is not a victim of circumstances...discover these and you will learn who you are... you will be made well...you will experience your wholeness.

For me, I came to realize that while yes, sometimes I am a shy and quiet person, the narrative I had created around those words had become a version of an "I can't because..." story that was keeping me from being who I am and living the life I'm called to live.

Something had to change...and it did, otherwise I would not be standing here today. So, what changed?

"Now I become myself," writes May Sarton, in her poem of the same name. "It's taken time, many years and places; I've been dissolved and shaken, Worn other people's faces..."

Sarton knows, as Jesus also demonstrated, we really become ourselves when we are empowered to seek our wholeness...when we are able to take a good, honest look at ourselves without judgement...when we give or are given time, patience, and shown kindness in the face of challenges or conflict...and when we find places we can risk being vulnerable and in so doing discover our depth and potential for strength and resiliency.

Becoming one's self is an intentional, spiritual process, a process of shedding a partial or false identity in favor of our fuller, truer identity. It is through this intentional, spiritual process of becoming that we learn who we are and begin to transcend false dichotomies of self as good or bad, sick or healthy, shy or outgoing, able or unable, and the narratives we construct from these that disempower us.

And this holds true for institutions as well as individuals. Churches are no exception. Indeed, many small churches have adopted a self-identity and accompanying narrative of inadequacy, poverty, decline and defeat....dragging a tale of woe behind them like a ball and chain, lamenting the past and pining after things they don't or no longer have. And the pandemic has reinforced that narrative for many churches.

But not SUUS.

The pandemic hit everyone hard and SUUS was no exception. A lot changed and changed quickly. And the changes kept coming like waves crashing relentlessly on the shore, one after the other. Worship changed, programming changed, ministers changed, some members and families stop coming. How easily you could have adopted a narrative of disempowerment. How easily you could have taken to your mat, lying dispirited, stuck in a collective "we can't."

But you didn't. You have chosen an identity and created a narrative of empowerment. "We are small in number but great in spirit, determined to support and live into our values come what may." That was the message behind the stories I heard in my meetings with Jere, Ann, and Enrique, your search committee. And it is a message I've continued to hear as I've met more and more people here. It's been present in the highs and lows shared. It is a hopeful message, a joyful message, an inspiring message.

Does this mean there are no issues that need attention, concerns to be addressed or work to be done here? Of course not...no human institution, including churches are without their share of frailties and challenges and it is important for churches and people not to gloss over them for they are part of our wholeness too...without this awareness it is entirely possible to move from an empowering narrative back to a disempowering one fueled by delusions of grandeur and ego. This is why all spiritual work is more accurately described as a practice rather than an accomplishment.

Becoming ourselves as individuals and as a community of faith is first and foremost a spiritual practice in which we, in the words of the late Henri Nouwen, "...constantly go back to the truth of who we are and claim it for ourselves. I'm not what I do. I'm not what people say about me. I'm not what I have. Although there is nothing wrong with success, there is nothing wrong with popularity, there is nothing wrong with being powerful, finally my [spiritual] identity is not rooted in the world, the things the world gives me. My life is rooted in my spiritual identity. Whatever we do, we have to go back regularly to that place of core identity."

I've heard this wisdom repeated over and over by the people I've met in ministry. I remember one woman in particular. I met her when I was working as a hospital chaplain on an oncology unit.

During a visit she said to me, "This experience has been hard. More importantly though, I've learned more from this experience than I could have imagined. I've come to see I'm not a patient dying of cancer; I'm a person living with cancer and that has made all the difference."

These are brave words.

Words that emerge when we risk the question, "Who am I, really? For in doing so we may just become ourselves and live the life that is ours to live.

Who are you?

This was Jesus' real question for the man at the pool; the question to which my minister pointed me, and May Sarton invites her audience to ponder. And it is the question from which the woman living with, not dying of, cancer, discovered life anew in each day that remained.

May we then learn to trust the wisdom of their questioning, risk continually seeking to become ourselves, as individuals and a community, and thus be made whole.

Amen and Blessed Be