



TAKING HOLD

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I would like to begin this morning by quoting Monty Python: “And now for something completely different!” You know how Jeff always has some funny relevant story for his intro. I don’t have one. This is my big intro – we just love you guys. Really we’re so grateful to be here.

But I would like to tell you how I came to be speaking this morning. Lest you think this is going to be a regular occurrence, you need to know that I’ve been working on this for years. I wasn’t preparing to speak today, but I was working through this passage of scripture, which was a story in John chapter 5, for my own sake.

A friend of mine once asked me, “Karin don’t you just love the hard sayings of Christ?” And I thought, “no.”

But she was also the friend who asked me, “Don’t you want to live like the Bible is True?” Yes, I want to. I believe the Bible is true. I believe the Bible is true for so many reasons – for the historicity of Christ, for the Cross, for the Big Bang theory (which dovetails quite nicely with the biblical account of creation), for Kalam theory which says that everything that has a beginning must have a cause, because of my Auntie Ruby who did amazing, selfless work in the world because she loved Jesus. I believe the Bible is true. But it’s another thing entirely to live like it is, right?

So this Summer I continued to journal and think through and study what this certain passage was about – so that I could start to live like it was true. It was a difficult and personal passage for me. What actually opened up the passage for me was a verse in the book of Philippians. And since Jeff is going through Philippians right now, he asked if I would share it with you this morning.

In Philippians 3, Paul is exhorting his readers to follow hard after Christ saying that everything he thought was worthwhile, he now considered garbage compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. He talks about wanting to identify himself completely with Christ – even to the point of sharing his suffering and becoming like him in his own death. Then he says,

Philippians 3:12

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

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It's like a tiny microcosm of the Christian life – Christ took hold of me, by his love and for his glory, and my long term response to his grip on my life is to love and glorify him.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that scripture interprets scripture. And when I read that passage in Philippians, it interpreted the story I had been struggling with for so long – which is a story in John 5. I believe it is a fleshed-out version of this passage in Philippians – a way to model how to live like the Bible is true. It shows a clear picture of how each one of us is pursued by God, how we all encounter an obstacle, and have an opportunity to choose God back.

John 5:1-15

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

“Do you want to get well?” What a question. It is full of meaning and worth mulling over. In almost every other story in the Bible where Jesus heals someone, it's because they have asked Him for it. But this man had been paralyzed for so long, he couldn't imagine anything else. And Jesus saw his condition. It's a condition that many people are in today and it's called hopelessness. And Jesus asked him, “do you want to get well?”

If you were to meet Jesus today, and he asked you that question, what would that be about for you? What part of you is in need of healing?

If you are feeling clean out of hope today, the Lord Jesus sees your condition. He sees my condition, and He's asking. Do you want to get well?

When the paralyzed man hears that, he responds by saying,

"Sir," "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

You can still see the archeological remains of these pools in Jerusalem today. Tradition has it that the water in the pool would start moving and the first person in the water would be healed. So it was a popular spot for sick people to come and wait for healing.

This man doesn't even answer Jesus' question – He talks about how his healing has been impossible. How he has had no friend to help him into the water. How he is profoundly alone He is so used to this way of life. He doesn't say, "Yes I want to get well! Could you do that?!" . He clearly doesn't see Jesus as a potential healer.

The man's hope was off. This man's hope for healing was tied to a source that could never work for him. But he stayed by that pool for years! When you say you want something but you keep going down a path you know doesn't lead there, can you really say that's what you want? In asking this man if he wants to get well, Christ is pointing out a big inconsistency in his life. Nothing will change if he keeps pinning his hopes on getting in the water.

The man in this story doesn't even realize what he's been doing as he ignores Christ's question and begins giving excuses. Isn't it amazing that this is precisely the person that Jesus goes after? It is the exact person that Christ pursues and asks "Do you want to get well?"

You know Jesus never did wait for an answer from that man.

Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

Sometimes I tend to think that God does nothing without my first prompting him. I think of myself as the pursuer. But I get the order wrong. "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of me." He takes hold of us first. He is the great pursuer of our souls.

I love how author Anne Lamott tells of her beginning relationship with Jesus. She was an alcoholic, using a lot of drugs, making bad relationship choices over and over and over. One day as she was out walking, she heard singing coming from the church not far from her tiny houseboat. She slipped in to the back of the church to listen in - something she would begin to do often – and she said this about the music;

Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life. But I had to leave before the sermon.

One week she had just made a string of choices that were her darkest moment – most steeped in sin – most far from holy. And she was scared sober – "shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill." And as she lay in the dark she became aware of a presence in the room - she writes,

The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus.

Jesus is at work in the world. He pursues us when we are nowhere close to being hospitable for Him. He goes after us when we are at our worst. If what is keeping you from God this morning is the idea that you need to clean up for Him first, just skip it. We don't have it in us. Come to Him first. God is love, and we come to him a mess. That is the correct order of everything holy. He takes hold of us, so that we can take hold of Him.

Jesus the pursuer didn't even wait for an answer from the paralytic. He just went ahead and healed him. It didn't depend on anything except his deep need, and Christ's desire for him to be well. I don't know why some people experience instant healing from God, and others get a process. But I do know that the Bible says that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. His power has never changed and his love for you is strong, and his desire for you is that you would be whole and holy.

Sometimes when I've felt really deep in need, I feel like I should probably do something to earn God's help. Have you ever felt that way? Like you'd better be really good for a while to ask for that job or that healing, or patience for a half-hour. I am surprised at how often I need to be reminded of the truth that God is a perfect parent – whose fatigue is non-existent, whose mercies are new every morning. And when we come to him in need, He doesn't shame us, or hold his will behind his back.

O Hallesby wrote a wonderful book on prayer that is about 70 years old. In it he writes,

Listen, my friend! Your helplessness is your best prayer. It calls from your heart to the heart of God with greater effect than all your uttered pleas. He hears it from the very moment that you are seized with helplessness, and He becomes actively engaged at once in hearing and answering the prayer of your helplessness.

That lightens my heart! Sometimes I seem to think that I'm not supposed to come to God empty handed. Like I'm supposed to have something to offer – my own good works or at least some good ideas for him to take into consideration. But when I'm really honest with myself, I've got nothing. And my best offering is my helplessness – my best prayer.

There are plenty of other cases in the New Testament where faith was required for healing to happen. Faith in God seemed to be fuel for Christ's action. But God can work any way he wants to. And in this case, Jesus does all the pursuing. And He is ridiculously extravagant with his love for us. All of us have been recipients of his grace and healing at one time or another without even realizing it. Without even asking.

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Let's look at the verse from Philippians again;

I press on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of me.

Christ takes hold of us. We have a God-encounter and it's real and it changes us. Many of us have experienced that – a time when we knew truth about God and it affects our lives in a profound way. And then, universally, there's an obstacle. There's always an obstacle. Which is why we have to press on. The paralytic had no sooner been healed than he had his first obstacle;

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat." But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'" So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"

The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him at the temple.

So here's the paralytic walking around with his mat. He's just walking through the streets with his mat all hanging out there for everyone to see. He's on his feet – able to see things he hasn't ever seen! From a height he's never been at before! Having strength to move upright! Able to look people in the eye! Probably forgetting that he was carrying anything. Can you imagine his joy?? It's a beautiful picture.

And then the religious leaders see him. They know who he is. They've seen him for years – maybe even given him a few coins once in a while. They see his mat. And yet there is no rejoicing for his freedom. They don't celebrate with him – they don't cry out "how did this happen? This is great!"

They said, "You can't carry your mat on the Sabbath."

This is a picture of how damaging religion can be. Religion that values rules over people, Religion that cares about how things look on the outside and doesn't care for people's broken hearts. Religion that is based on a faith so fragile and so lacking in grace, that someone else's failures might rub off and make us look bad. Religion that forgets to live like the Bible is true and full of grace. Wounds that are inflicted by religion can be so toxic. Can anyone relate to that?

Sometimes when people come to New Day, I will ask, "Are you wounded?" Because it's important for us to recognize and deal with Church wounds as soon as possible. They require honesty and care. Church wounds that are not dealt with become infected, because every subsequent hurt taps into that pain, and it's overwhelming.

Maybe one of the reasons why I love this story so much is that it's very personal for me. About 7 years ago, I read this story, and when I read the words "Do you want to get well?" I knew it was an invitation from Jesus to heal me up from my church wounds. I

had some stuff I had been carrying for a decade that left me feeling fearful and defensive and paralyzed. And here I was about to become a pastor's wife! I remember reading that invitation to get well and I reacted just like the paralytic – a non-answer. “Oh that's so nice of you God, but I have church issues.” I had lived with them long enough that I thought I would never be free of them.

My coping mechanism many times was to get sick. I would start planning my sore throats to begin on Saturday nights so that I wouldn't have to go to church the next day. Something had become very broken about church for me. I expected to get hurt there, to have people complain, and to get derailed from Jesus entirely.

I had suffered some bad church experiences, But as the Lord started healing me up, I realized that I was also doing some messy thinking all on my own. I had started to believe two things that were neither helpful nor true;

The first was that I was looking at a handful of people who had hurt me, and I called them” the church”. And I let that label stick for a long time. Can anyone relate to that? I know that I was doing that to protect myself from more hurt, but it also kept me from any healing..

The second thing I struggled with was a blurring of the lines between church and God. I thought that if I loved everything about church then I was loving God well. Well that's just silly. But I believed it. I was a pastor's daughter who had set herself up with a no-win situation that went like this;

- 1) Church is not safe
- 2) I have to love the church

Do you know what you get with that combination? Paralysis. My expectations set me up. Can you relate to that? I had to change the way I thought about church.

When Jeff took his first seminary class at Fuller, Eugene Peterson was his professor, and as they were discussing church wounds, he said to the class, “what do you expect when you get 100 sinners together?” That was a revelation to me. Why? Because I had lived with this heavy expectation about what church SHOULD be like. But it wasn't reality. Some people at church won't act like Christ. As a matter of fact some of them don't even know him yet. Could it be, that the people who had wounded me at church were just some really lousy representatives of Christ? I can live with that. That is not paralyzing. That's just life. It's still hurtful, and annoying, but I've been hurtful and annoying too. It's why scripture reminds us that when we live in community together, we will have to say I'm sorry and forgive each other.

The paralytic, though he was healed, could have come to the conclusion that church was not worth pursuing, because religious people were awful. But he didn't, he did the very thing that all of us who have been wounded are invited to do. He went looking for Jesus!

I am convinced that this man knew an important fact that many of us need to be reminded of;

Do I know the difference? The Church is not God. And it never will be. Do I know the difference between the two? This is critical – especially for those of us who are carrying church wounds in our pasts. The church is not God – not even close.

I recently read a Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave. I know of no other person who could have more reason to confuse God and the Church. His life was full of horror as a young boy. He was forced to leave his mother at age 8. His Dad was most likely his Owner, as he obviously had a white father. But he was never told for sure. He watched and experienced brutal beatings at the hands of leaders in the church. And worked to fight for freedom when it looked like it would never happen.

And yet in an appendix to his book, he wrote,

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity Proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ I recognize the widest possible difference... I love the pure, peaceable and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.

Frederick Douglas loved the Christianity of Christ. He knew how to go looking for Jesus. And he had a real understanding that the church was not God.

Hebrews 12:2 says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith”. The Lord knows we really like to fix our eyes on something. And I had fixed my eyes on church. But remember it was my “messy church” definition, where a few hurtful people represented the whole thing. It wasn’t the Bride of Christ, it was like the Bride of Frankenstein. It was when I was feeling the most paralyzed that God called Jeff and I into church planting. I couldn’t even say the words without crying. But I believe with my whole heart that God saw me, and must have thought, “Karin, I know you are full of church wounds, and the best place for me to heal you up is for you to be a pastor’s wife.”

My eyes were fixed on this faulty definition of Church, and God had me get right up close to it, so close that I had to tear my eyes away to see the only one who could deliver me.

Do you find yourself right up close to an obstacle today? There are so many circumstances we can find ourselves in that feel bigger than God. When that happens, it’s time to go looking for Jesus. Ephesians 6:12 says that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil. If your circumstances seem too much for you that’s because they are. Our struggle is a spiritual one and it requires spiritual help. For this, we have Jesus.

As we know, with every obstacle is an opportunity for a choice. The paralytic chose to press on to find his Healer.

Later Jesus found him at the Temple and said to him, ““See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”

I believe that in that moment, Jesus was laying claim to that man’s life. It was very much like what the Priest did with Jean Valjean in the book *Les Miserables* by Victor Hugo.

Jean Valjean was an ex-convict who escaped from prison and ended up being welcomed into the home of a Priest. In the middle of the night Jean Valjean stole all the silverware in the house, but was immediately arrested. By the time the police brought him back to the Priest’s home to accuse him, the Priest had already discovered the missing silver.

When he saw Jean Valjean he said, “Ah! Here you are! I am glad to see you. But how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?” Valjean is utterly speechless. When the police finally let him go, the Priest whispers to him, “Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you. I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.”

When Jesus spoke to the man in the temple, he was withdrawing the man’s soul from hopelessness and begging. He claimed his soul for God. He said “stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” What could be worse than 38 years of paralysis and begging? How about going back to it after being healed? Jesus isn’t asking him to become perfect, he’s saying give up your old life. I am your life now.

And now comes my favorite part of the story;

The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Can you picture him standing holding his mat, considering, “What should I do now? I have been healed. I can do anything I want.” He could visit relatives, find someone to celebrate with him, take up cross-country, anything!

But he presses on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of him. He goes back to the synagogue to find the religious leaders. He stands there – not having had an audience for 38 years. And He says, “You asked who healed me. I came to tell you it was Jesus.”

Do I know what’s next?

Why is that so important? Because it was the moment when the man went active. He passed from being a hopeless paralyzed beggar, to being soul-bought by God. And in that choosing, he was re-defined. He had been the beggar at the gate for 38 years. It was

his life sentence. And it could have been his identity even after his healing. Except he chose something different.

As I was reading many commentaries on this passage, I came across a passage that just made my heart stop. It said,

By carrying his bed publicly, he exposed himself to the censure of the court, and was, at least, to be scourged in the synagogue. Now, will he run the hazard of this, in obedience to Christ? Yes, he will. Those that have been healed by Christ's words should be ruled by his word, whatever it cost them.

He pressed on to take hold of Christ, who had so graciously taken hold of him.

This past Wednesday, 17 year old James Boyden was digging in the sand at the beach. He's always been a digger, and on Wednesday he had excavated a hole in the sand that was about chest deep. But as he bent over to dig a bit further, the sand around him caved in with a thump, burying him alive. At first he could breathe a bit because of the space created by being bent over. But he quickly ran out of oxygen and passed out.

His father was with him at the beach and rushed to the scene, which was now simply flat sand. He began to dig, and he said it was like his hands just went right to his son's head. The news report said James regained consciousness as his father touched him and cleared his face so he could breathe. He opened his eyes, looked at his father and said, "Thank you, daddy." It's pretty touching to hear that from a 17-year old. At that point rescue workers came and lifted James back to safety unharmed.

Many of us have dug ourselves into a hole. And some of you were thrown in by no fault of your own. We are suffocating under the weight of the world. But our Father sees our plight, and he rushes to our rescue. He stretches his hand out to us through Jesus. And it's his touch that brings us back. The only response that's fitting is "Thank you, daddy."

How do we take hold of Christ? When He asks us if we want to get well, we don't offer excuses. We don't point out why it's impossible. We don't pin our hopes on what hasn't worked for 38 years. We say yes. Yes, thank you. We go looking for Jesus when we encounter obstacles and we're willing to go active for him because we have been soul-bought by him on the cross. Will you pray with me?