

I would guess that anyone who has ever sat through a high school English class is familiar with that famous line from Shakespeare’s tragic play Hamlet. In the play, Hamlet is a young Danish prince whose father—King Hamlet—has been murdered by his own brother, who in turn marries the grieving queen—also his sister-in-law—to become king himself. The whole thing is a cover-up that of course, in the spirit of all Shakespearian tragedies, also involves romance and epic battles. In Act 3, scene 1, young Prince Hamlet—rundown with the grief of his father’s death, his uncle’s betrayal, and his mother’s ignorance to it all—is contemplating his own life and whether to end it in suicide, when he declares, “To be, or not to be—that is the question.”

To be, or not to be. For Hamlet, it’s a question of complex meaning that can’t be answered with a simple act of killing, for he must acknowledge that what hangs in the balance is not just his death, but also his life.

Shall I end it here? What would I become still if I didn’t end it here? Are the pains and misfortunes of this life really so great that I can’t endure to live another day? Is it better to throw punches at life or to just lay down and take the blows as they come?

“Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And, by opposing, end them.”

Then there is also the question of what comes next.

“To die, to sleep,  
No more. And by a sleep, to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks  
That *this life is made up of—that could be a good end*  
*For maybe death is only a dream.*”

*Nothing to be feared after all.*

Ay, there's the rub."<sup>1</sup>

Here's the problem, concludes Hamlet: what if death is worse than life? What if we are better off staying right here where we are, neck-deep as we are in the muck and mire and misery of life, then to take a chance on death? "To be, or not to be—that is the question."

But is it? I suppose it is one question. But it is *the* question, the one that decides it all? Jesus has another question for us today. "Do you want to be made well?" This is the question he puts to the ill man who is sitting beside the pool of Beth-zhata in Jerusalem. According to John, this man has been sitting there in the same spot for 38 years. John doesn't tell us what the man is ill with. He tells us only that the spot where the man sits is the spot for invalids—for the blind, lame, and paralyzed. Don't be fooled though; this isn't handicap seating. This isn't reserved seating for the guests of honor. Invalids in the ancient city of Jerusalem were not protected citizens. They were pitied and despised. If you were an invalid you were considered "abnormal," "broken," "less-than," "*in-valid*," and if you were *in-valid* the going assumption was that you must have done something to deserve it. You must have committed some wrong, pissed God off in such a way that God was now getting back at you by making it impossible for you to do anything but sit around in the same spot every day begging the world for mercy.

Jesus knows this. In seeing the man sitting there beside the pool, Jesus knows this man didn't put himself there. He knows that theologically speaking, everyone believes God has put the man there. God has made the man an invalid. But who has actually put the man there, in the very spot where he sits? Maybe his parents have. After all, this man has been this way—whatever "this way" is—for 38 years. Chances are, no wife ever came along to marry him. After 38 years, maybe it's his parents who still get him up every day and carry him into the city on their way to work. "Here, I'll be back for you at the end of the day," they say as they set him down on the ground. "See what kind of a living you can scrape together today." It's not the life they want for their son, but it's the best they can do.

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<sup>1</sup> *Italics* represents my own translation of the original text.

They are not the only ones, though, who have put him there. Who else has put the invalid in his spot?

When I was working on my Social Work degree, I spent a semester living in San Francisco and working with AIDS patients at the San Francisco General Hospital. If you've ever been to San Francisco then you know it's a city built on the side of a hill—two hills actually that rise from the east and the west. The top of the hill, of course, makes for the prettiest views—the bay to the east and the city to the west. The top of the hill, called Knob Hill and Pacific Heights, is also where the wealthiest neighborhoods are located. By some trick of fate, the top of the hill is where I lived. The hospital, however, is located at the far southwest corner of the city. To get there, I had to take a bus that drove me downhill through the Tenderloin district—the poorest neighborhood in the city—and through the Castro—the historically gay community in San Francisco. Along the way I had to transfer buses 4 times, and in between transfers I had to walk several blocks. When you do this every day, you start to notice some things. I noticed that in the southern part of the city, all the buses were gas operated. But as you moved north towards the wealthier parts, the buses all became electric. Now gas creates pollution, electricity does not. I also noticed that it was more expensive to ride the electric buses than it was to ride the gas ones. And, there was no direct line that ran from the top of the city to the bottom, or from the bottom to the top. Needless to say, if you lived at the top of the city, you had a nice little protective barrier from the world below. But if you lived at the bottom of the city, you were going to have a difficult and expensive time of getting to the top.

What's my point? My point is that it matters how we design our cities and towns and homes and schools and churches, because the way we design these things has a lot to do with how our lives will end up getting arranged in the end. Is this how the invalid got stuck in one place at the bottom? The city planners and wealthy home owners at the top simply didn't care enough to build him any roads to get out by?

Still, they are not the worst offenders of the invalid. The worst offenders are the religiously conservative thinkers who preach and teach a God that punishes certain people to the bottom, keeping them there for 38 years. 38 years, that's my entire lifetime. It's a long time to suffer. Suffer that long and you begin to forget there was a time when you weren't in-valid, when you weren't pushed aside, when you weren't made to sit in one spot,

when you weren't made to feel like you deserve the hell you're getting. Suffer that long and you too will start to say, "To be, or not to be—that is the question."

Then along comes Jesus. "Do you want to be made well?" He knows this poor man can't make himself well, that someone else is going to have to make it happen for him. As it turns out, the poor man also knows this about himself. "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up," he tells Jesus.

In every religious tradition, there are symbols of healing, and in ancient Judaism there were pools that when stirred up, were believed to have healing power. Now maybe it was all just voodoo nonsense. Who's to say? After he had a stroke, my late grandfather couldn't walk anymore. His whole left side just went limp; no strength in his left leg; all the muscles in his left hand retracted and it became a permanently clenched fist. But if you dropped him in a pool, his whole body would loosen right up and he'd swim circles around you. In those moments, you would have never known he was an invalid, and maybe this is the kind of healing the man in Jerusalem has in mind when he tells Jesus, "If only there was someone to put me into the pool."

When I think of healing pools, I think of our baptismal font, which of course is much smaller than a pool. And there is nothing magical about the water we put in it. But there is something magical about us saying that everyone is welcome at these waters. And I have seen people healed by these waters. People who had never before heard it said about them, "You are a blessed child of God, full of promise." And when they heard it, when they felt the water falling down on them, it was like being born again.

I need to rush on to my conclusion, because I want us to see how the story ends. Notice that Jesus never puts the invalid man into the pool. He asks him, "Do you want to be made well?" and when the man says, if only, Jesus tells him to stand up, take your mat, and walk. The man does, and this is where John records what it is that makes this story so compelling: it was the Sabbath. You think the story is going to be about a man who hasn't walked for 38 years. Or about a pool with magical healing powers. Now that's a cool story! Tell me that story! But instead, the whole thing winds up being about what day of the week it is, and how it's the Sabbath. The Sabbath? Who cares that it's the Sabbath? Who cares that you're not supposed to walk around on the Sabbath? If you were stuck in one place for 38 years and today you can finally be free, would you care what day of the week it is? No, I

imagine we wouldn't. Then again, I think we—and by “we” I include me—I think we have come to expect so little of Sabbath and of rest. I would guess that for most of us, our problem isn't that we have been stuck in one place for 38 years, it's that we can't sit still for 38 minutes.

When I was at the Orthodox Jewish service two weeks ago and it started almost 40 minutes late, I kept checking my watch, and I couldn't figure out why no one else was checking their watch. Don't these people have other places to be after this? And then it hit me—no, they had nowhere else to be. For Jewish communities, Sabbath is a tried and true day, a full 24 hours. For me, it's about an hour on a Sunday morning, and I'm checking my watch at 57 minutes to think about where I need to be next.

How can I expect to get any lasting rest, though, from that kind of living? When every day is the same and I barely have time to tie my shoelaces.

Last night, I went with several of our confirmands and their mentors to a catholic mass in Providence. Afterwards, over dinner, we were talking about the rules of worship. Are there certain things that should and should not happen in a church service? Specifically, we were talking about things like baptism and music, and somewhere in the conversation Bella, Emmy, Ryan, and Carolyn all said, “I bet you couldn't find a way to work Justin Timberlake, the Star-Spangled Banner, and a Slip & Slide into worship one week?” Is that a challenge? I asked them.

I've thought about it, and—Bella, Emmy, Ryan, and Carolyn—here's what I have to say to you: I'm not sure I could ever find a way to appropriately work a Slip & Slide and the Star-Spangled Banner into worship. I'll see what I can do about getting you a little J.T. But if you really want to see some sparks fly, you're going to have to come at me with a lot more than Slip & Slides. For this is the Sabbath, and we are Jesus people. Wouldn't you rather heal the world?