

## Good News for the Depressed

[John 5:1-18](#); [Philippians 4:6-7](#)

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Sunday, April 2, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

We continue with Dr. Icenogle's Lenten series from the Gospel according to John, titled, "Good News for the Distressed".

Jesus went to Jerusalem for a festival. (He enjoyed festivals, weddings and dinner parties. He loved people. He often used those events to be with people and to spread his message.)

Like all ancient cities, Jerusalem was walled for security. In English, the entrances were called 'gates'. The gates were very important and lively places where business often was transacted and people congregated. If you came and went from the city, you had to go through one of the gates--- reminds me of living in Virginia and going and coming over a bridge to DC. (They probably had morning and evening rush hours through the gates---donkeys backing up.) Near the Sheep Gate was a pool with five porticoes, shady areas in which the ill and poor could beg.

And beg they must, because there was no health insurance. No government checks came. If the family did not do the nursing and feeding, then the only other source of money was begging. Of necessity, beggars assembled near the gate with its rush of foot traffic, pleading with people to be generous.

Picture the scene. It was not pretty! In the shade of the buildings around the pool lay or sat or sprawled the most awful versions of human misery. Wobbling malformed legs. Shriveled, inert limbs. Budging tumors creating gargoyle faces. Eyes blank. Moaning. Bickering for the offered coin. And the stink of unwashed bodies in unwashed rags. One man had been there for thirty-eight years. (On the days when I am frustrated and feeling sorry for myself, I should read that sentence over and over. It makes me realize how blessed I am.)

I. Jesus came by. 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?"

In my younger years, Jesus made no sense to me. Do you want to be made well? "Of course he wants to be made well! That is a dumb question!" Now, I understand. This is wise question. Ask any alcoholic or substance abuser, "Do you want to be made well?" "Sure," the reply comes. "Then stop drinking and live differently." "I can't. I can't make that choice. I just can't bring myself to do it."

Ask some who wrestle with chronic emotional problems. Do you want to be made well? "Of course!" "Do you want to be made well, really made well?" "Ummm, I guess that I am not sure; I am afraid. I really don't know if I can live without this misery. It is familiar. I sort-of have adjusted to it. I am not sure what I would think about if I did not have it on my mind. I want to be free of the pain, but, deep down, I don't really want to get well."

People who feel depressed may be holding on to thinking patterns, rehearsing emotions, and making predictions that are detrimental, even sinful. Let me explain those shocking words.

I am cautious about using the word 'depression' because we use it too freely and broadly. We use it to describe an illness that requires clinical treatment and for minor down moods that we once called the blues. Today I am not talking about clinical depression, such as bi-polar. I am talking about depression in response to an event, a change. That event may be a loss or an unexpected success. I refer to being thrown for a loop, feeling upset and down after a life-changing event. (Wonder what happened to put this man down.)

Depressed people have difficulty hearing good news. A severely depressed person may not be able to hear good news. The good news may be dismissed; it may be misinterpreted; the reaction may be guilt or anger. Instead of seeing the possibility, the potential, and grabbing it with eager excitement and a cheer of thanks, the depressed person may continue rationalizations of why it does not apply, and continue with the same ruminations of negativity.

When Jesus said Do you want to be made well? Jesus asked the man, “Are you ready to give up the life style which you have lived? Are you willing to think about different subjects? Are you willing to change, not just your mobility but also your mind-set? Are you willing to go into the unfamiliar? Are you ready to step forward into the new life that I will give you?” (This man would not have been healed had he said no.)

Now, I ask you very serious questions: Are you holding on to attitudes that you know you should give up, but deep down don't want to? Are you doing things that you know are harmful, but deep down don't want to stop? Are you skittish about living without them? Though you are in pain, are you deep down too scared to change? Are you holding back so that God does not have a free hand to heal you?

II. The sick man answered Jesus, 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.

I asked Dr. Icenogle why he chose this text for depression, and he replied, “Don't you think the man was depressed after thirty-eight years?” Sure. A contributing factor to feeling dispirited is loss of control. The person feels to be a victim. The person cannot shape what is going on, but feels like a pawn that is being manipulated and sacrificed. He feels powerless. The other people get there before I can. They get healed and I don't!

This thirty-eight year-old man must have had some rough emotional and spiritual days! He must have felt that his life was out of his control.

It is very easy and understandable for people who are ill or injured to let their negative emotions become psychological temptations. Their loss turns into resentment. Their joy perverts into anger. Their laughter shifts into put-downs and snipping. Their focus is self. God and others get pushed away.

Therefore, ask: Am I compounding my misery over lack of control by blaming and other negativities?

III. Jesus asked a penetrating question, like the great physician that he was. Following his technique, I ask you who feel down: Are you thinking the same negative thought over and over and over? Are your thoughts almost completely about you?

A technique that I use to discern the spiritual dimension of the down person is to say: “Tell me about your prayers. What do you pray about? What words do you use?” A depressed person frequently reports praying the same thoughts over and over. They are whining pleas, complaints or “why me” questions. Depressed folk spend little time thanking God in detail for the blessings they received and naming those blessings to God. Nor do they look for the many blessings in detail that happen to others. Most of the prayers on Wednesday will be the same as on Tuesday as they were on Monday as they were on Sunday a month ago.

It is sound theology and helpful psychology to change the mental approach, e.g., toward our food. If we are in a depressed mood, we may think like this: “I don't want to eat. This tastes terrible. Why can't I go to a nice restaurant like other people do?” Or, bark at the cook, “This looks like road kill! Can't you ever learn to cook?” Instead, invite the Holy Spirit of Jesus to give us the gift of gratitude, so that we say, “I am glad that I have something to eat. And I am thankful that I have plenty of it.” If our prayer life is a daily recitation of whining, change! Reword the prayers into thanks and praise.

Picture God blessing us. Take the approach, “Thank you, God, for nourishing road kill (give God a chuckle), because I know that there are people in Africa tonight who don't even have road kill due to the draught.” And say to the cook, “This is a nourishing meal. You do wonders after working an eleven-hour

day.”

This requires discipline. It can be learned, with willingness and prayer and practice. We must have help from the Holy Spirit help! The Holy Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we are feeling and acting out those traits, then we are in harmony with God. When the Holy Spirit produces those traits, we don't stay down.

On the other hand, when we are hostile, negative, upset, impatient, selfish, rude, undependable, harsh, and out of control, we are not submitting to the influence of the Spirit. So, when I ask about the content and wording of prayers, I listen for expression of these negative and sinful traits. And, I listen for ruminations of these. Satan loves negative ruminations! Satan must be holding his belly in laughter, and squealing, “Got ‘em!” when Satan hears many prayers. Negative prayers divert our energy from living the Spirit's life and they harm relationships. Do we really want to be well? Then we welcome fresh thoughts, feel positive emotions, and relate with Christian love.

When feeling down, thank and praise God! Live by the Holy Spirit!

IV. What is good news for the depressed?

Keep in our conscious thoughts: God loves us!

Love empowers. Love makes us positive and hopeful. Love energizes us. Love strengthens us against the seduction of blue moods.

God has demonstrated divine love for you and for me in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is divine love personified. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever would believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Jesus said, “What greater love has any man than he die for his friends.” What did Jesus do for us? He called us his friends, and died to make up for our sins. Can there be greater love?

God knows that we need to be loved. That is why the New Testament is saturated with the message of love. God knows that we need to be loved!

When feeling down, think about Christ on the cross acting out God's love for us!

And, God knows that we need to love! We need to love---love our parents, love our spouses, love our children, love our animals, even act in love to those who mistreat us---we need to love.

What are the dynamics? When we feel loved, it comes naturally to love. When we internalize the love of God, own it, it will not stay boxed inside. It will come out in love for others. The elder John wrote: “We love because he first loved us.” If you have not explored that text from the first Epistle by John, do. I John 4:19

What happens to relationships of the person who is down? The person ends up with friends and acquaintances who have the same personality traits. Why? Because others tire of listening to their story; they are a downer. Therefore, depressed persons often feel lonely. They don't understand the impression made by their facial expression, their tone of voice, their body language, their subject matter, and their word choice. And they don't get it, because the power of the depressive feeling controls them.

I talked with John many times prior to and after his divorce. Word was brought to me that John had said that our church was very unfriendly and no one ever spoke to him. That comment surprised me. We tried hard to be friendly and welcoming. We had a strong reputation for being warm. You had to work to be unknown in that church. A couple of Sundays later, I happened to be in the back of the church as John came in. His shoulders were rounded forward, his face parallel with the floor, his eyes focused on the carpet. He looked like a bulldog about to bite. To talk with him, you needed two strong men to pick him, and rotate him ninety degrees to see his face. Would you have talked with John? Depressed feelings hinder, may even block, the love that the Spirit wants to give us. We have to be willing to accept love, and

to be God's conduit of love to others.

God gives us families, God gives us church, God gives us friends for the purpose of providing love and support to each other. It is mutual. It is never intended to be us-versus- them, get love only or give love only. It is in the words of the mission statement for Congregational Care of this church: We are a community of committed servants in which everyone receives care when in need and offers care when able. God's plan is that what comes around goes around.

When feeling down, invite the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus to change you. Refocus the mind. Reflect upon the love of God in Jesus on the cross. Emphasize giving thanks and praise. Pass on the love of God by speaking a word of encouragement or affirmation, or offer a helping hand.

In order to be the whole people whom God intends, we have to be loved and to love!

Conclusion (and Benediction):

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." John 13:34 Paul wrote, "...in everything ... with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God...will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Phi. 4:6-7