



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 29, 2016

"From Whining to Winning" (Encounters with Jesus)

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John 5:1 Afterward Jesus returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holy days.

John 5:2 Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches.

John 5:3 Crowds of sick people—blind, lame, or paralyzed—lay on the porches.

John 5:5 One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years.

John 5:6 When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, "Would you like to get well?"

John 5:7 "I can't, sir," the sick man said, "for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me."

John 5:8 Jesus told him, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!"

John 5:9 Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath,

John 5:10 so the Jewish leaders objected. They said to the man who was cured, "You can't work on the Sabbath! The law doesn't allow you to carry that sleeping mat!"

John 5:11 But he replied, "The man who healed me told me, 'Pick up your

mat and walk.'"

John 5:12 "Who said such a thing as that?" they demanded.

John 5:13 The man didn't know, for Jesus had disappeared into the crowd.

John 5:14 But afterward Jesus found him in the Temple and told him, "Now you are well; so stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you."

John 5:15 Then the man went and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him.

John 5:16 So the Jewish leaders began harassing Jesus for breaking the Sabbath rules.

John 5:17 But Jesus replied, "My Father is always working, & so am I."

John 5:18 So the Jewish leaders tried all the harder to find a way to kill him. For he not only broke the Sabbath, he called God his Father, thereby making himself equal with God.

This is a peculiar story. Much of the story has to do with whining. If you have the tendency to whine, then I have good news— help is on the way! If complaining comes easy to you, today's message might give you some insight as to why, and also provide some help on how to stop whining.

The reality is, no one likes a whiner. No one likes a Debbie Downer.

No one likes whiners who throw pity parties till 2 am. No one likes to hear people complaining why life has treated them unfairly. But sometimes, we just can't help but whine. Sometimes the pain is so great that some whining would certainly be in order. Today I'm talking about the whining that can be either excessive or gets in the way of true healing.

In our story, Jesus is in Jerusalem. He goes to a place called the Pool of Bethesda, which, interestingly is Hebrew for the House of Mercy. Archaeological excavations indicate that long before Jesus and long before the Jews came into the area, pagan peoples regarded this site as sacred. It is very possible that the pool was once dedicated to the Greek god Asclepius, the god of healing.

Some historians said the water back then was red, which might indicate a lot of iron in the water. This also might have something to do with why people thought the water was different and might have some healing properties.

In this encounter with Jesus episode, it sounds like Jesus is by Himself. There's no mention of disciples with Him at the Pool of Bethesda. He looks around and sees many people lying there. They are sick, lame, paralyzed. Some are blind. Why are all of these people hanging around the pool? Apparently back in the first century, people believed that at times an Angel of Healing would come and disturb the water,

Causing it to bubble. Whoever got into the pool first got miraculously healed.

There's a man lying there who has been sick for 38 years. This may have been for his whole life. Jesus knew this man had been ill. Jesus went up to him and asked, "Would you like to get well?" Strange question to ask of a sick man, but we will see why later.

And instead of saying, "Yes! I WANT to get well. Can you heal me," this man, whom we could call Johnny the Complainer, immediately whines. He doesn't answer Jesus' question but launches into his list of complaints.

"I can't, sir," the sick man said, "for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me." (John 5:7)

Jesus is asking him if he wants to get well, but Johnny the Complainer replies with the reason why he cannot get well—"I don't have anyone to help me get into the water."

1) Whining distorts reality.

There was no angel that came every now and then to the pool of Bethesda. It was just a superstition. What made the pool bubble up was a subterranean stream that rose occasionally underneath the pool causing bubbles. And here was Jesus who in reality could heal Johnny the Complainer right in his face, and all Johnny could do was say why he can't get healed.

Where is God in all of this? Whining can blind us to God. There may be something in our life right now that is causing us great pain and we whine about it a lot. Maybe we have been whining about it for 38 years.

But God wants to turn that whining into a life of winning—where we can see how our life has a lot more wins than we think... that there is a way we can be more positive that helps us overcome our obstacles...and the more He is in our lives the more He can make a difference for good. God wants us to win in the face of overwhelming challenges, rather than to wilt in whining.

When we have ministry time at the end of every worship service, we have people trained in prayer to pray for you, including praying for healing. It's Jesus asking you every time we are together, "Do you want to be healed...do you want to be made well?" That's also why hundreds have come to our healing services over the years. They respond to Jesus asking us, "Do you want to be healed?" It's a time to be humble and admit that we cannot heal on our own. We need God's help.

Whining distorts reality. It can make us find excuses as to why we behave the way we do, even though we know there are healthy alternatives. For example, when we have problems in our marriage or other close relationships, we may choose to not discuss it with the other person because we were raised in a home where problems were simply not discussed. They're just swept under the rug. We may start to think that circumstances will get better if we handle them like how we were raised. But that may not be necessarily true.

That could be like the lame man believing in the cultural myth that an angel caused the water to bubble up in the pool of Bethesda just because that's all he has come to believe all his life. Likewise, there may be certain cultural beliefs that WE'VE grown up with that may be stopping us from getting healed – might be something ethnic or some pop-

psychology myth like if you are in trouble don't see a counselor, don't share problems with friends, be a maverick. And then somehow the Angel of "it-will-all-work-out-in-the-end" will suddenly come and heal you and make the situation resolve itself.

Sometimes we want something bubbly and spectacular to happen. But we may simply need is the presence of God, or a simple prayer, or maybe a simple coffee time with a friend. And even today, Jesus is saying, "Do you want to get well?" The best healing comes from Jesus.

In our story, Jesus hears the whining and then just cuts to the chase, and says, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk! (John 5:8) And boom! Johnny the Complainer gets healed. Now, though we have witnessed MANY INSTANT miraculous healings when people are prayed for at our church, healing takes time for many others. But know that Jesus is always instantly ready, to begin the journey of wellness with us.

2) Whining gives us amnesia.

Today is Memorial Day. Memorial Day is part of our annual rhythm. But it is much more than just a holiday. It's a time to remember and be thankful for those who gave their lives for our country. When we remember and are thankful for their sacrifice and the sacrifice of their families, we will be more grateful for our freedom and for this country. The U.S. is far from perfect but it is a great country because it was built on sacrifice.

If we could come to grips with remembering all what the veterans did who died to give us freedom today, then maybe we wouldn't complain. I have several friends who always complain about our government and our leaders. They complain constantly. It's draining. They are Johnny One-Notes.

They constantly talk about the same thing over and over and they don't volunteer to help society; they just complain.

When we whine, we forget. We get amnesia. We start focusing on the negatives. We just zero in on our problems. We think only of the obstacles. When we whine, we forget all of the wonderful things Jesus has done for us. He put us in a beautiful country and state called Hawaii. He has put us in a relatively low-crime state. He gave us clean, crisp air and sparkling clean natural water from deep artesian wells. We have wonderful greenery around us.

One of the greatest secrets to ending our whining is to start making lists of all of the things we are thankful for. Start making a list. If we can just write the list, we will perhaps see God's presence in our lives. Put a pad of paper at your bedside, and every night write two things you're thankful for. It's a game-changer.

But if the whining is just too great, then I just ask, try going just 24 hours without criticizing or complaining. Just go 24 hours starting right now. And if you are thinking, "Gee, Dan, that is a dumb idea," okay you just failed so start the clock again.

Now clearly, whining gets us into more negativity and more mess in life. It's a form of sinning because it shows a lack of trust in God for your future and not being grateful for how He has blessed you.

In our story, an interesting thing happens. We see that after Johnny the Complainer gets healed, Jesus disappears quickly. Johnny was lucky. It was kind of a drive by 3-point healing - Stand up, take up your mat, walk! OK you're healed. Gotta go. Then Jesus left. I think Jesus just didn't want to bother with crowds or the acclaim right there. Remember He

went in there alone.

So people go up to Johnny and say, "Who was that guy? What happened?" And Johnny says, "I don't know. The man just said, 'Pick up your sleeping mat and walk,' and so I did."

And for us, it is my hope that whenever there is good in our life, whenever there is a healing, or an insight or help provided, we might see it was the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit behind it all the time. Jesus is always trying to reach out to us. He is always present. Remember He is the one who gave His life for us. Easter is His Memorial Day to remember.

So later in our story, after the lame man has now gone into the Temple (which may be a good thing because maybe he went to the Temple to worship and thank God), a very cool thing happens. Jesus goes to the Temple to find Johnny. It's one of my favorite verses in the Bible:

John 5:14 But afterward Jesus found him in the Temple and told him, "Now you are well; so stop sinning, or something even worse may happen to you.

Johnny didn't know who healed him, and so later Jesus SEEKS him out in the busy crowded Temple to tell him who Jesus is. I think Jesus is always seeking us, trying to share His love and insight. But after we have been blessed, rescued, helped by God, Jesus adds this: Now that you are well, stop sinning or you will get it even worse. Seek my will. I am always seeking you so make me the center of your life and absorb my love for you.

Sinning is when we follow our own prideful ways, or false gods, false superstitions, false traditions, a false esteem built on anything but God. For if we follow false gods, false superstitions, traditions or anything else than God, worse things will happen to us. If you follow God's principles, life will always get better. If

we don't, I guarantee, guarantee life will get even worse. That is basically what Jesus Himself said that to you today in the Bible passage.

3) Whining blinds us to hope.

When we whine, it's harder to see hope. It's harder to feel the outstretched hand that wants to help. Whining is like the thorns that choke a beautiful flower.

Sometimes something very bad happens that it makes us wonder if any good can come out of it, especially if it's something traumatic or tragic. But remember we must always see God's perspective.

Sheryl Sandberg gave the commencement address at the University of California in Berkeley this year. She is the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook. I'll let her words summarize a recent tragedy in her life.

She said: "One year and thirteen days ago, I lost my husband, Dave. His death was Sudden and unexpected. We were at a friend's fiftieth birthday party in Mexico. I took a nap. Dave went to work out. What followed was the unthinkable — walking into a gym to find him lying on the floor, flying home to tell my children that their father was gone. Watching his casket being lowered into the ground.

"For many months afterward, And at many times since I was swallowed up in the deep fog of grief — what I think of as the void — an emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even to breathe.

"Dave's death changed me in very profound ways. I learned about the depths of sadness and the brutality of loss. But I also learned that when life sucks you under, you can kick against the bottom, break the surface, and breathe again.

I learned that in the face of the void — or in the face of any challenge — you can choose joy and meaning.”

Sheryl Sandberg said this profound thing: You will be defined not just by what you achieve but also by how you survive.

Many of you are going through some really hard stuff right now — illness, loss of loved ones, loss of a job, financial difficulty, or strained relationships. Before this talk ends I want to give you some practical advice about how you can win instead of just whining. How you can build your life back instead of just complaining how hard it is.

A few weeks after her husband died, Sheryl was talking to her friend Phil about a father-son activity that was coming up. But since her husband Dave was not there, they had to come up with a plan to fill in for Dave. But then Sheryl starting crying — “But I want Dave!”

Phil put his arm around Sheryl and said, “Option A is not available. [Dave’s gone.] So let’s kick the heck out of option B.”

For many of you, you can’t change your circumstances of your loss. So let me tell you how to kick the heck out of option B.

In her commencement talk, Sandberg also said how there is research out there by psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, who discovered three elements that people need to overcome to help them survive. They all begin with the letter “P”

1) Personalization

Personalization is the belief that we are 100% at fault. We personalize it. While it is always good to look for any seed of truth of our involvement in something gone

wrong. I am not talking about that. I’m not talking about when we need to take responsibility when we are at fault. Rather I am talking about the personalization that says that everything that happens to us happens because of us. We think it’s 100% our fault.

When Dave Sandberg died, Sheryl continued for a time to blame herself. He died in seconds from cardiac arrhythmia. She poured over his records. What could she have done to prevent it? But when she learned the 3 P’s, starting with personalization, she realized that it wasn’t her fault. His doctors didn’t identify his coronary heart disease. How could she have?, she said. I was an economics major!

Studies show that if you can get by past personalization you will get stronger. Sandberg said: “Teachers who knew they could do better after students failed, adjusted their methods and saw future classes go on to excel. College swimmers who underperformed but believed they were capable of swimming faster did. Not taking failures personally allows us to recover— and even to thrive.”

2) Pervasiveness

This is the belief that an event will affect EVERY area of your life. Everything is awful. No place to run from your sadness. All of life sucks.

But then Sandberg started to remember all of her friends and family who were with her supporting her. Remember how I said it is important to be thankful. She became more thankful. She remembered the loving times. The tragedy did not affect all areas of her life, unless she realized she allowed it to.

3) Permanence

This is the belief that this suffering will last forever. Sandberg did say that for months she felt a

crushing sadness. Often people project that sadness and think it will be forever. Those of you who have broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or lost a job, or flunked a test, or you didn’t get into the school you wanted, or wasn’t chosen for a sport or a play, know today the pain does not last forever. For some of you it feels that way now, but hear me, it won’t last for you permanently.

Sheryl’s rabbi once said to her that time would heal her wounds but for now she should “Lean into the suck.” These were times that really sucked. Sandberg wrote a best seller called *Lean In*, but she never thought she had to lean into the pain.

Yes, there are seasons we have to lean into our sucky times, cry our eyes out, but we need to know healthy people don’t let it go on forever. In fact, Sandberg said, that one day her friend Adam Grant, who is a psychologist, told her something that was so counterintuitive. He said, “Think about how worse things could have been.”

And she thought, “Are you kidding me? [What horrible advice!] How could things be worse?”

His answer stunned her. He said, “[Your husband] Dave could have had that same cardiac arrhythmia while he was driving your children.” And at that moment, Sheryl was overwhelmingly grateful for the rest of her family being alive and healthy. Gratitude took over some of her grief.

That’s a true-life story about someone we don’t know, but I think it resonates with us all. But I know for many of us, we can still wonder if God can bring good out of bad. Can He bring light out of the darkness tunnel? Yes, but not always in ways we understand. I close with this about a family we do know.

Two weeks ago I shared with you that 3-year old Christian DeWalt, was part of our church community, who I baptized two Easters ago, along with his brother and sisters. We love his parents Chip and Elizabeth who recently moved the family to Atlanta. But Christian was found face down in a swimming pool and died three days later.

Our congregation was deeply saddened by this. When the staff met two days after Christian's passing, I could feel a pall over our office. One of our staff had to go home because the grief was so much. I myself felt a low-grade depression from grieving all week.

But it was not a time to complain or whine. It was a time to seek God.... and hope for SOME light in the midst of darkness. And the light finally came in a way we didn't expect. We learned that young Christian had his organs donated to five other children. Two children in New York, two in Atlanta, Georgia, and one from an unknown city. Five other children had a life because of him.

In addition, a nurse in the hospital, who helped the DeWalts and cared for Christian in ICU, committed her life over to Christ due to the way the DeWalt family was dealing with the grief and ultimately Christian's death. A little flame of joy got bigger and bigger in the midst of the darkness of tragedy as now we knew that 6 people were given new life, one of whom by dedicating her life to Christ has eternal life and now maybe the others have a longer life to someday meet Jesus. And oh yes, we have the full and firm belief that little Christian is in heaven in the lap of Jesus. That's the 7th blessing. That's a big win.

When we baptize a child we say and believe that the child is a child

of the covenant, meaning it is not so much parents stating their commitment to God by baptizing a child, but it is God making a holy promise. It's a covenant that He will be with the child till the end of time.

What stops whining?

Remembering God! Knowing of His covenant with us. This is a God who seeks us out, as Jesus did with Johnny the Complainer when Johnny didn't know who Jesus was. This week listen and look for Jesus in the details of life, who desires healing and hope for us all. And when we do that, we all win. Amen? Amen.