“Party for One”
John 5:1-15
Series: Love the World  Week 3 – Loving the Discouraged
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He sat with his mother and brothers around the kitchen table - the same table where they ate breakfast and read the Bible every morning. But tonight it was time for a game called Flinch. As mother dealt out the cards, he received an awful hand. The cards were so bad, he started to whine and complain. It became so intolerable that mother suddenly stopped the game. “Boys, put down your cards. I want to say something, particularly to you.” She fixed her gaze on the one throwing the pity party. “You are in a game in your home with your mother and brothers who love you. But out in the world you will be dealt bad hands without love. Here is some advice for you boys. Take those bad hands without complaining and play them out. Ask God to help you, and you will win the important game called life.”

A lot of bad hands were dealt to the boy as he grew up. Dwight Eisenhower went on to fight in World War I. He became the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in World War II and the 34th President of the United States. Whenever life dealt him a bad hand, some requiring literal life or death decisions, Eisenhower said, "I've tried to follow that wise advice always."1 Stop complaining. Trust God. Play the hand.

Has life dealt you a rotten hand lately? Every once in a while do you feel like complaining? Have you ever wanted to throw yourself a pity party? “If only I didn’t take that wrong step or make that bad decision,” you moan. “If only I could redo those thirty seconds. Why did this happen? Why did it happen to me? Why is everyone against me?” It’s embarrassing to admit that self-pity can get the best of you. It seems incredibly silly and childish. But that’s the way self-pity works: it’s irrational. What’s more, the pity party you throw is really a party for one. Occasionally we try to invite others to join the “festivities.” Our moans and complaints are the invitations we issue so others will come and comfort us. “Misery loves company” the old saying goes. Yet when I’m in the pit of self-pity, I don’t want to hear about your misery. I want you to focus on my problems and comfort my pain. “It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to.” Consequently, we drive people away until we are left with just a party for one.

Often, if we are honest, that’s exactly what we want. Self-pity is self-centered and selfish. The only one on our side, who truly understands and cares, is the one in the mirror. In our heads, we whisper soothing words to ourselves. “No one appreciates what I’m going through.” “Why is everyone being so unfair?” “Why does this always happen to me?” “Someday they’ll be sorry.” “God, why did you do this to me?” Self-pity is often described as being ‘Stuck in the mud.’ Instead of facing the situation and moving forward, we sit and stew in sadness.

1 Adapted from Norman Vincent Peale, This Incredible Century (Tyndale, 1991)
There are a lot of unhappy people around us. Check out the expressions of the students in the hallways, the drivers in the other cars, the commuters crouching over their cell phones, the shoppers in grocery stores and malls. Everyone looks tired, bored, worn out and self-absorbed. Wealth and fame are no protection against despair. Scientist Albert Einstein wrote, "It is strange to be known so universally, and yet to be so lonely." Marilyn Monroe said, "Sometimes I think the only people who stay with me and really listen are people I hire, people I pay." One of the most popular gathering places in the Chinese city of Nanjing is not a sports bar or an internet café. It’s a bar with a sofa, a few tables, and tissues—a lot of tissues. It’s call a “cry bar.” For $6 per hour, customers can sit and cry. Owner Luo Jun says he opened the bar when clients of his last business said they often wanted to cry but didn’t know when or where to go. In a bizarre way, it actually feels good to be ‘stuck in the mud.’ It feels good to feel bad. Self-pity can be a very powerful drug.

The other method for dealing with despair is running from it. Bruce Thielemann writes, “Not too long ago, the Hayden Planetarium in New York City offered an open invitation to anyone who wanted to be on the crew of the first journey to another planet. Eighteen thousand people applied. A panel of psychologists examined the applications and concluded the vast majority applied because they were discouraged with their lives here and hoped they could find a new life somewhere else.” Give in to self pity or give up and run away. Are those our only options? No. But the answer starts with a question. “Do you want to get well?” That’s a strange thing to ask a paralyzed man. In fact, it sounds downright cruel. For thirty-eight years he was unable to get off his mat. He couldn’t even remember how long he’d been brought to the pool. According to legend, the pools of Bethesda possessed healing power. Patients from far and wide were carried to Jerusalem and deposited in the shade of its five columned walls. This sea of humanity included every imaginable illness. The stench and the moans of the sick filled its halls. Yet that seemed perfectly peaceful compare to the moment when bubbles percolated up in the pools. This was the sign the healing power was most potent. Suddenly the primitive hospital became a madhouse of limping, hobbling, crawling patients racing to get in the pool first. The winner received the best prize of all: healing.

But one patient never had a chance. He could not move off his mat. No one plunged him in the pool when the water was stirred. Who could blame him for sinking into self-pity? Year after year, he watched newcomers leap over him into the healing bath. He probably resigned himself to the fact he would die there. Bethesda means “House of Mercy.” But for him it was a house of misery.

Then one day a Stranger walked up to him and asked a question. “Do you want to get well?” “Do I want to get well?” the sick man thought. “Of course. Who would want to live their life lying among such sickness and death?” Perhaps he misunderstood the question. Maybe the Stranger was asking why he wasn’t cured yet. “Sir,” the patient

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2 David Jeremiah, What Are You Afraid Of? (Tyndale, 2013), pp. 117-118
3 "Quick Takes," World magazine (7-31-04).
4 Bruce Thielemann, "Dealing with Discouragement," Preaching Today.
replied, “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” (John 5:7). But the Stranger did not ask, “Why don’t you get in the pool?” He asked, “Do you want to get well at all?” Jesus knew the man long ago lost the will to be well. Hope died. Self-pity and despair took its place. Attitude, not ability, is the key to recovery. Would the man have the willingness to step out of his self-pity party?

“Get up,” Jesus commanded “Pick up your mat and walk” (v.8). Now comes the test of his attitude. Is he willing to trust the Stranger? As he lifts his head, his shoulders, for the first time, follow. Fingers stretch. Palms push down and propel his chest up. Biceps flex. There is a bend at his waist. Like fire, the healing races down his pelvis, thighs and shins to his feet. He stands for the first time in almost four decades. He triumphantly lifts the mat over his head and does a victory lap around the pool.

Hope flooded his soul when he became willing to leave his pity-party behind. Doctor Jerome Groopman, professor at Harvard Medical School observes: “I think hope has been, is, and always will be the heart of medicine and healing. We could not live without hope. Even with all the medical technology available to us now, we still come back to this profound human need to believe that there is a possibility to reach a future that is better than the one in the present.”

We can run from life, resign ourselves to self-pity or accept God’s hand. Elisabeth Elliot says "Resignation is surrender to fate; acceptance is surrender to God," "Resignation lies down quietly in an empty universe. Acceptance rises up to meet the God who fills that universe with purpose and destiny. Resignation says, 'I can't,' and God says, 'I can.' Resignation says, 'It's all over for me.' Acceptance asks, 'Now that I'm here, Lord, what's next?' Resignation says, 'What a waste.' Acceptance says, 'In what redemptive way can you use this mess, Lord?'"

Jesus approaches you today and asks, “Do you want to get well?” What situation keeps you imprisoned in a self-pity party? You may not be physically healed. The circumstances may stay the same. But there are inner wounds and illnesses that Jesus wants to cure. “Stop sinning,” Jesus later said to this same man, “Or something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). Empty self-pity from the cup of your life and let Him fill it with hope.

Penny is a single mother of five children. When her youngest child was a year old, a succession of events destroyed the life she’d known, but through God's grace, she was given the life she has now.

“I was in a relationship with someone for 10 years, and I felt my life was good. He had a decent job, I was off of welfare, and my world was in an upswing. Then my boyfriend fell back into his drug addiction, and it took over his life, leaving me to support my five kids alone. My apartment building was sold, and I was forced to move. The only

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6 Jill Briscoe, "In the Father's Arms," Preaching Today.
place for me and the kids to go was a motel. I made $324 a week and had to pay $343 in rent, so even though I worked 40 hours a week, I began cleaning rooms in the middle of the night at the motel. The $3 I made for cleaning each room helped to feed the kids during the week.

My two older children attended a church's junior high ministry, and they finally convinced me to come to church on a Sunday. I really enjoyed it, and God started speaking to me.

But my life became overwhelming. It was so hard to see my children suffering because of me. I just couldn't take care of them like a mother should. One night I parked in front of the church and cried. I asked God, ‘Why was I given these children if I am unable to take care of them?’ They were hungry, unhappy, and living in a one-room motel. They were suffering because of my inability. I was trying to fix things, but it wasn't working. So I asked God if I should turn them over to the state. I cried for about two hours that night, but I got no answer. I went back to the motel and kept going.

After a few more weeks, I was falling deeper and deeper into a hole I couldn't get out of. One day after work, I was at the end of my rope. There was barely anything to feed the kids, they were arguing with each other, I had a stressful day at work, and I had to work all night cleaning rooms. There was no one to help—so I sat down at the tiny table in the room, closed my eyes, and I prayed. I asked God for strength. I told him I didn't need money to miraculously fall from the sky, but I just needed endurance through this trial. I asked him to give my children peace, and to give me a sign that I was going to make it. After I prayed, I lifted my head and took a deep breath. Right at that moment there was a knock at my motel door. There were two people from a care team at church. They brought me groceries and a cup filled with candy. I cried. I still don't know who those people were.

There were still some hard times after that, but God gave me strength to find a new life. I joined a small group and became part of that wonderful family. Now God has moved me to a great place to live, two blocks from church. He brought me a promotion at work, so I don't have to clean motel rooms at night anymore.

I remember so clearly the feelings of helplessness and saying, ‘If I can just make it through today...’ But our God is faithful. I look at my cup every day now. I keep it in my car as a reminder that when we are at our lowest, helpless and broken, if we just turn to God, he will fill up my cup.”

The pity party’s over. Lift up your cup. Let God fill it with hope.

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7 Penny H., from a testimony given at Emmanuel Reformed Church, Paramount, California (7-11-04).