ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JOHN 5: 1-15

"A MIRACLE---AND A WARNING"

Today's gospel lesson for this particular Sunday of the Pascha season is about a miracle of healing---and a warning given after the miracle.

We just heard about how our Lord Jesus Christ healed a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. That is a long time! That makes this an especially powerful miracle. 38 years of waiting---and Jesus healed him in an instant.

And then later in the day the Lord talked to him again and gave him a warning. As we read in verse 14 of today's reading-----"Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you." To paraphrase a bit---"I'm happy you're well now! But quit your sinning or something worse than being paralyzed will happen to you."

Our modern world seems fixated on being healthy. There is a positive side to this as we should strive to take good care of our God-created bodies. But it can get excessive and obsessive. We can end up thinking good health is the most important thing of all. There is a common saying that expresses this way of thinking. I bet many of you have said it; I think I probably have said it, too. But it's really not true…… Here's the common saying, "As long as you have your health, you have everything." Well, not really…. Good health is very good, but…..Jesus said, "Sin no more, that nothing *worse* befall you." In other words, there is something *worse* than not having good health. That "something worse" is sin and its consequences----possibly leading to our losing our souls.

And an excessive focus on being healthy is actually rather silly in a way---because what happens to each one of us eventually? No matter how healthy we are, no matter how long we stay healthy, eventually we get sick and die. Even the best of health is temporary.

Some years back, Dr. Stuart Berger wrote some books on nutrition. He explained what were the best foods to eat, and which ones to avoid. And he said that if you carefully followed his instructions, you would be healthy and could live to 100. Dr. Berger died in his sleep at age 40.

Then a more famous author whom you might remember---- he wrote some pretty strong selling books. His name was Jim Fixx and what he wrote about was running. His main point was that it was very healthy to be a runner as it keeps the heart in tip-top shape. At age 52, while out jogging, Jim Fixx had a heart attack and dropped dead. (in "Our Daily Bread", 6/27/95)

What Berger and Fixx wrote about might have been accurate and following their instructions is probably a healthy thing to do. But their stories remind us that even perfect health is temporary. It is a good thing to try to be healthy, it is a good spiritual practice to try to be healthy because that will probably involve some discipline, self-denial, etc. But it will only last a while. After a while, each of us will get sick and die.

But there are worse things than getting sick. Things even worse than a 38 year long paralysis. The Lord made that clear in that verse 14 warning----"Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you."

This warning was so important that, later in the day after the miracle was done, Christ hunted down the man He had healed. We know this because verse 14 says Jesus "found him". If He found him, that means He was looking for him.

What was this warning that was urgent enough to search for the formerly paralyzed man so he could be warned? We know that Jesus loved the man---He proved it by healing him. But there was more to do to help the man----he needed to be warned.

Because Jesus knew that the man had been paralyzed because of his sins.   Going back to verse 14 again, the Lord told him—"Sin no more, than nothing worse befall you." The clear implication here is that the man had sinned before and that the sinning had caused the illness. And the warning amounts to this----"Don't sin anymore or something even worse than that paralysis will happen to you."

Is sickness always caused by sin? Certainly not. There are other gospel passages where Jesus clearly says that sickness and accidents are not always because of sin. But s*ometimes* sickness is caused by sin. And Christ is clear here that that was the case for the man he healed of paralysis.

Sometimes sin causes bad health. Sometimes it's a real obvious connection. If you sit drown and drink lots of whiskey and then drive in your car-----and your drunkenness causes you to hit a tree, badly crippling yourself…… Well, that health problem obviously is a result of your sin. It's not always that simple and obvious. And a lot of times we don't know the cause.   But however it happens, and however little we know about it, it sometimes does happen that sin causes sickness.

That's what happened to the man in today's gospel reading from John 5. His sins brought about his paralysis. We have no idea how it happened and there's no point in speculating about what his sin was. But it happened.

And so Jesus' main concern is this----if sin caused the paralysis and if the man is now healed-------what will happen if he just keeps on sinning?   Something worse than paralysis! The loss of his soul.

St. John doesn't take the story farther in his gospel. So we don't know if the paralyzed man became a follower of Christ, leaving his sinning behind, and becoming spiritually healthy in addition to having his newfound physical health. We hope so, but we don't know.

Or (we hope not) did he ignore the warning from the Lord and fall right back into his sins? And end up in good physical health, but lose his soul……   We hope not, but we don't know.

But we do know the moral of the story. Physical health is very good. We should strive for it. And when we're sick, we should ask the Lord to heal us. But spiritual health, the salvation of our souls, is more important and should be our main focus in life. To put it briefly…..Physical health: a very good thing. Salvation: the essential thing to have.

So, if you are healthy, give thanks to God and do what you can to stay healthy for as long as you can, while remembering it's temporary….   If you're not healthy, ask God to help you and do whatever you can to get healthy, while remembering that if you do get

well, it's temporary…..

In either situation, keep your priorities in order. Remember that spiritual health, holiness in the Lord, living for Christ---that's what is most important. And that's true whether or not we're in tip-top shape or flat on our back in a hospital.

If you live for Christ, and one day fall asleep in Christ, then, by the grace of God, you will go to Christ after you die. And then whatever health problems you have, He will free you from them. As we pray in our memorial service prayers for our departed loved ones--- in the life to come "all sickness, sorrow, and sighing have fled away." How beautiful! Then we will be perfectly healthy in every way.

Physical health? A wonderful thing. Spiritual health and the salvation of our souls? Way more important. May our merciful God grant it to us!