

“The Church – Participating in Healing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – April 14, 2024

3rd Sunday of Easter

Psalm 40:1-5

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Acts 3:1-10

Introduction

Last Sunday, the second Sunday in Eastertide, we read the story of the risen Jesus who – after forty days of appearances to the disciples and other witnesses – ascended to the clouds; but not until after promising that the Holy Spirit would come upon them in power. The second chapter of Acts tells the story of Pentecost – one we will return to next month – and the birth of the Christian church.

Today, as we continue to look at the early chapters of the book of Acts and the formative days of the Christian church, we find Peter and John – two of the original twelve disciples of Jesus – going to the temple to pray. These first followers apparently did not see any conflict between their convictions about Jesus, their reception of the Spirit, and their continued practice of Judaism. Obviously, things became more complicated and conflicted later; but, at this point, Acts presents the actions of Peter and John, observing the traditions of their ancestors, as something one would expect.

It is in the ordinary, however, that the unexpected often happens...

Read Acts 3:1-10

Location matters. Eleven years ago, Brenda and I began looking at houses. We knew that, after we married, we would need a home to accommodate our blended family of seven; that was close enough for both of our jobs and would not require our children to change schools – and preferably be in walking distance to at least one school – which also had adequate outdoor space to play and park cars.

Yes, location matters; in real estate, but also in today’s story. A beggar who, as we are told, was lame from birth was brought each day to a place outside the temple, near what is called the Beautiful Gate, to ask for alms. Each day of his life, this nameless paralytic would expect people to help meet his daily needs; but on

this day, Peter and John demonstrated that healing through the name and in the power of Jesus brings new life.

This location was strategic because he could ask for money from people coming into the temple; Jewish tradition says that you can't go into prayer by ignoring the needs of people around you. Thus, the beggar outside the gate offered an opportunity to live up to obligation.

As it does now, beggars then surely made people uncomfortable. If you have lived or worked in, or even visited downtowns, you have seen people begging on the streets; those who have chosen locations where encounters between those who have and those who apparently are lacking are almost unavoidable.

Whether we can or choose to give or not, our tendency is to avoid eye contact, to look past them. Thus, Peter surprises us when he says to the man, "look at us." The disciples are choosing to engage on a different level. This man, Willie James Jennings notes, is the person Jesus would see and demands his disciples see. Here, at the beginning of the post-Pentecost ministry of the followers of Jesus, people will be seen fully, clearly.¹

Peter and John, looking intently, fix their gaze on this man. They see him. And the one doing the asking directs his attention back to Peter and John. There is connection and expectation.

That expectation must have been crushed when Peter announces he does not have any silver or gold. Peter does, however, offer the power that has been given to him through the Spirit to reenact the works of Jesus. "But what I have I give you," Peter says, breaking the expectation of what will be received; giving something the man could have never imagined asking for.²

After offering his gaze, Peter – in the name of Jesus – reaches out his hand. The man who was lame from birth rises and stands and begins to walk. But, notably, he also leaps and praises God and enters the temple with the disciples. The one who had always been on the outside now comes in. The joy seems to be not only about being healed, but also about being welcomed in. He has been restored not only in body, but also to the community.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *Acts from Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

² Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

The people who witnessed this restoration noticed him, they knew this was the man who daily sat outside the gate asking for alms and they were filled with wonder and amazement.

Thus, they were all participants in the healing: Peter and John come to understand the power of the Spirit that had been given to them; and that when they stop to look intently, it is possible to be participants in the kind of restoration people need but maybe cannot articulate or even imagine. The man born lame experiences what he never has before; not just an ability to stand and walk and leap for joy, but to be fully seen and included in his community. And the witnesses to the scene experience the wonder of new life in the name of Jesus; they see their community expand beyond the expected barriers of health and inclusion.

A story like this can't help but make us think about those barriers that have too often been raised in our society and world: economic policies that tend to favor the rich over the poor, the vestiges of racism that perpetuate bias and disinvestment, structural barriers to those with differing physical abilities. Stigmas exist for the homeless and those who need mental health or addiction care. We fail to make adequate space for the deaf or blind or neuro divergent.

Like the lame man outside the temple gate, these folks need to be seen; they deserve our full gaze. As the church, we are called to open our ears to the voices and eyes to the efforts of people and organizations that advocate for fairness and full inclusion. We need to pay attention to who lacks viable transportation options or clean water or nutritious food sources.

But one of the beautiful lessons of this story relates to how we give witness to the power of the Spirit. Sometimes, it is appropriate – and even necessary – to shout from the rooftops as we advocate for healing and change. Other times, it happens during the course of everyday life; like when we are on our way to pray, or to buy groceries, or go to school or for a walk in the park. In these ordinary places, and when our eyes are really open, we can help people without calculating what will win souls or grow the church. In the story we read today, we see an act of mercy that brings people to a place of wonder and amazement and allows for the opportunity to testify to faith.

Much speculation has been offered regarding the exact location of the Beautiful Gate. Maybe, because the beggar was brought there each day expecting to receive alms, it was where visitors and pilgrims would enter the temple. We don't know, for sure. But there is something about that name which helps us to recall the beauty and intricacy of the human condition; that the fact we can stand

and walk, that we can gather together and communicate with one another, that we can watch with wonder and amazement for possibilities of healing and restoration in the world. As the scriptures remind us, we are wonderfully made and beautiful in God's sight. But how difficult it is for our minds to remain in that state of wonder with the ills and uncertainties of the world all around us. Entering into a place of prayer through the Beautiful Gate surely helped the temple visitors to witness with amazement the beauty of God's creation, including those who are made in God's own image – as varied and differently abled and seemingly flawed as we all might be.³

So, sometimes, we are the ones in need of healing and wholeness; waiting for a hand to reach out toward us, even if we can't quite imagine what it would be like to stand up and praise God. Other times, we are the ones in a position to say, "what I have I give you" – whether that might be a shoulder to help bear another's burdens, an encouraging word, an act of hospitality, or a material gift. And other times, we are those privileged to give witness to healing and wholeness being enacted; to watch the leaping and hear shouts of joy; to be reminded of the power of Jesus to bring new life out of darkness, injustice, tragedy, or grief.

Yesterday, in his *World-Changing 101* seminar, David LaMotte reminded those of us gathered from churches across the Presbytery to learn together that Christians – like trees reaching toward the sky – are called to reach toward the kingdom; not measuring our success by whether or not we reach it, but how we devote ourselves to its pursuit. We do not, in fact, have just one calling, but many. The appropriate question to ask is not "what do I do with my life?" but "what do I do next?"

Let us each, therefore, be given the imagination to wonder how we might be healed and brought into greater wholeness and inclusion. Let us each consider what, in the name of Jesus, we might have to offer to others; especially those unable to stand on their own. And let us, as the church – the gathered community – open our eyes to be inspired by acts of healing that are taking place all around us: the hungry fed and the naked clothed, the lonely befriended and the grieving comforted, the forgotten seen and the excluded welcomed. And when we see and hear these new signs and sounds of life in this place, let us remember to be amazed and filled with wonder, for this is God at work in and through and around and ahead of us. Praise be to God. Amen.

³ O. Wesley Allen, Jr. from *WorkingPreacher.com*