

EASTER 3 - Acts 3:1-10

Peter Heals a Crippled Beggar

As we continue with the Book of Acts, it might be helpful to look into the background of Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts. The first half of Acts centres on the life and ministry of Peter and the expansion of the gospel among the Jews, and how God changed the minds of people like Peter to see God's kingdom as something more than the Jewish nation. God had to break the Jewish apostles of their ethnocentrism. It was hard for them to envision God's kingdom including non-Jews.

The remaining half of the book focuses on the life and ministry of Paul. It describes how the gospel spread to the Gentile world, despite the Jews who tried to hold it back. Both Luke's Gospel and Acts, were written by the same author to the same person, called "most excellent Theophilus."

Luke was a highly intelligent man who set out to tell the story in precise detail. Luke was not a personal witness to the gospel events. He came to faith in the second generation of believers. But, using accurate and reliable sources, he acquired his unique material, that which differed from Matthew and Mark, by interviewing eyewitnesses, people who had actually seen events firsthand. He testifies to have "carefully investigated" everything from the beginning and then set things "in order."

Theophilus is mentioned twice in the Bible, once at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, and once at the beginning of Acts. Although this Greek name, meaning "lover of God" was common, we know nothing about this man from history. However, the specific title Luke gives him: "most excellent Theophilus," was reserved for addressing someone like a governor or high official. It was never used to address a common man.

Today's story follows the Pentecost event. The church is born with the blessing and joy brought by the Holy Spirit as the apostles launch right into the task of spreading the Good News and growing the community of followers. The church was launched and the Holy Spirit brought blessing and joy to all. There were signs and wonders

among a living, breathing, loving community of faith. Even unbelievers praised them. Many were being added to the church.

Today's Acts story, clearly shows the continuity between Jesus and Peter. Jesus healed, now Peter heals. Jesus revealed the power of God in himself, Peter allows the power of God to flow in the name of Jesus. The newly born church was out there meeting the people and proclaiming the Good News of the Risen Christ both in word AND deed.

In its early days, the church was still very much a part of the Jewish community. Believers regularly went to the temple. About three one afternoon, Peter and John were on their way to the temple for their regular time of prayer. At the same time, a man paralysed from birth was being carried by his relatives to the steps that led up to the temple. Giving alms was a common part of the good works Jews practised with hope of eternal reward. We are told that the lame man was over forty years old. No doubt the family had exhausted their resource trying to help him, but he was still reduced to begging. And we can be sure that this had been going on for a very long time, as people at the temple recognized him.

The man asked Peter and John for money. This is not that difficult to imagine if one has ever experienced a beggar or two, especially in the downtown area of any large city. Often the response from passers by is not to "see" any of them as they look down or away. But, today, the roles appear to be reversed. The beggar called out, not expecting anything to happen. After all, he has not yet reached his station, and they are nearly at his space, his station. The beggar hardly looked up. From experience, he simply expected to be ignored. Had he been directly in front of them, perhaps he would have stood a chance, but not on the way to his begging spot.

So, it was not the beggar who fixed his eyes on Peter and John, but they who first fixed their eyes on him. He may not have expected anything from them, but they fully intended to do something for him. Peter and John had no money to give him. It was not that they were opposed to giving to the poor, they just could not give what they did not possess. However, they could and did give what they did have. How

fortunate for the beggar! The best he hoped for was a little money. He did not get money, but he did receive his health and mobility.

Peter's response startles us. "Look at us! Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth walk." Taking him by the right hand, Peter pulled him up. Immediately the man's feet and ankles became strong. He stood and then, walking and leaping, he began to praise God.

For over forty years the man had suffered from an ailment which made him lame. He had never known the freedom of going anywhere without burdening others with the task of carrying him. This man had been a beggar for most of those forty-plus years. He was daily carried daily to the gate of the temple, a gate identified as the "Beautiful" gate, the entrance way into the court of the temple. The gate was his station, where he worked and where he begged day after day.

One wonders if Jesus had not walked by that way many times. Most likely he had. Why then did Jesus not heal him? Was he leaving work behind for his apostles to do? Or did Jesus know that in the sovereign plan of God, the Father would use this man's paralysis in an entirely different way? God's ways are mysterious indeed.

We don't know what this man had heard about Jesus or whether he had ever tried to reach Him to be healed. He probably would have given considerable thought to Jesus during his visits to Jerusalem, especially during that final week of His public ministry, before His death. His last week was characterized not only by daily appearances in the temple for teaching but also by healing as the blind and the lame headed to the temple.

Perhaps this man had made efforts to reach Jesus to ask for healing. But, immobilized by his ailment, he had to be carried to the temple to beg each day. He would be left until evening, until it was time to be carried back home. Perhaps Jesus passed by near to this lame man, who was unable to press through the crowds or to call out loudly enough to be heard by the Master. The man needed to be healed. Jesus could heal him. But first, he had to get to Jesus, and his lameness prevented

him from getting there.

It is not altogether clear whose faith it was that was instrumental in this man's healing, but it would seem this man had some degree of faith. He probably had hoped that Jesus would heal him, but he had no way of getting to Him. How this man's hopes of healing must have been crushed when Jesus was led outside the city to that cross! And yet, after the death of Jesus, it **was** Jesus who had finally healed him.

Peter seems to know from the outset (and John too) what he was going to do for this man. Somehow he knew that he had the power to heal this man, and that it was God's will for him to do so. There is a deliberateness to everything that Peter and John said and did. They looked intently at him. They instructed him to look at them. They told him that they had no silver or gold, but they did have that which they would give to him. Immediately Peter commanded the man to stand up and walk in the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene. It is as though they had said, "Jesus commands you to stand up and walk." By invoking the name of Jesus, they were showing his authority. This was done in His power and for His glory. Peter then grabbed the man by the right hand and raised him up. How different these new religious leaders were from those of the corrupt Jewish system. The Jewish leaders and priests had plenty of silver and gold. But they used their money to bribe soldiers to keep quiet about Jesus' resurrection. The Jewish leaders had none of God's power in them. In stark contrast, here are two men who own nothing but who have the power of God.

The healing caused a stir. The formerly lame man's legs and feet were suddenly strengthened and whole. With a leap, he stood up straight! As Peter and John made their way into the temple, the man, who had been lame came behind them "walking and jumping and praising God."

The man who had never before walked in his life stood up with a leap, and he didn't stop leaping. What a sight that must have been! Some would probably have dealt with such a miracle with great dignity and composure. Here was a man who had,

for his whole life, been a spectacle. He earned his living by drawing attention to his pitiful state. Now, he did not care that everyone was staring at him, as he leaped about, clinging to Peter and John, and praising God. It was a sight no one could avoid. It says later he was clinging to them. He knew that some mighty power had flowed through them to him and he was not about to let them go. The crowd in the temple was amazed.

Because of his affliction, this poor lame man had been forbidden from entering the temple. Only the pure and the whole could enter. The Jewish legalists considered someone like him to be sinful. They believed that such a disability was divine judgment for sin, or in the case of someone born with a disability, the sin of the parents. That the lame man was healed signals a new era in which one's condition, "the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind," are reversed so they too can participate in God's blessings of the kingdom. The newly healed man can now enter the temple - restored, physically and socially.

This is a glimpse into the new reality of the new kingdom of God ushered in by the Resurrected Jesus. The gospel of the new kingdom underscores God's concern for the least and the lost. But now, with the coming of the Holy Spirit, not only did the lame walk, but those considered unfit to worship God were suddenly set free to worship openly, even in the temple.

God had marvellously prepared this scene. The healed man had spent his life around the temple, begging. Everyone knew him, they couldn't have avoided him. His condition, was well known by all who frequented the temple. And the fact that he had been crippled from his mother's womb was more than ample evidence that he was hopelessly disabled, and so the miracle was a spectacular one. Those who witnessed it were understandably filled with wonder and amazement.

Hidden in the details of the healing story is an ecclesiological message: to be included in the worshipping community is to experience a form of healing. We can all offer healing to others by including them in our community of faith. The inclusion of outsiders stands in continuity with the ministries of Jesus and of the apostles. So

who are those who sit near our gates, on the edges of the church or of society, who will find healing in being attributed with full worth and personhood by the church? Note that Peter did not require of the lame man, belief in Christ to offer him healing. It was Peter's belief in Christ that effected the healing.

Similarly, the church need not accept only those who believe and act like us. Congregations as well as individual Christians are called to reach out to the stranger, the other. In the name of Christ, we can offer healing to refugees, those of different socio-economic status, immigrants, the disabled, people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, persons of different sexual orientations, and so forth. Those at the gates and the kind of healing needed by them may look different in different congregational contexts. But, as we see in this story, the gift of inclusion is as old as the church itself.

The Beautiful Gate where the lame man begged, stood as an entryway into the fellowship found in the gathered community within the temple courts. For others it stood as a barrier reminding the lame and blind that society considered them "less than" and not welcome inside sacred space.

Today's story provides our churches an opportunity to examine their priorities. Do the activities in the life of the church primarily benefit the members inside or encourage the members to extend God's love outside? To be inclusive or exclusive? Are our churches a beautiful barrier or a beautiful bridge? It is our call to turn the barriers into bridges to God's love, compassion, and acceptance.

Amen.

EASTER 3 SUNDAY PRAYERS FOR APRIL 14, 2024

In this holy time, we remember the ultimate sacrificial love of God for us through Jesus' death on the cross, and His victory over death. We offer our praises and thanks for the gift of new life given to us; for the total forgiveness of all our sins; and for the freedom that comes with the assurance that we are deeply cherished and loved by God. May we live as Easter people with the hope and joy of this good news!

We offer the prayers of our hearts, for the world, for all of Creation, and for all in need.

You are ever present, O God, yet we often fail to recognize You and Your ongoing work of healing and restoration in the world You love so much. Too often our sights are fixed on own trials and tribulations and the sorrows and brokenness of this daily life of ours. This makes us blind to Your powerful loving presence. Open the eyes of our hearts and enliven us to respond to Your invitation to be agents of reconciliation, of health and healing, of justice and peace in our world, wherever we may be.

Creator God, You come to us in the beauty of Your creation, on display all around us in this springtime where signs of new growth and new birth are everywhere. Help us to slow down so that we might experience Your presence in Nature and feel delight, awe and wonder at Your creative power. Help us to be good stewards of Your creation, endeavoring to live with a light carbon footprint, and supporting sustainable practices for the sake of future generations to come.

Compassionate God, we pray for the numerous regions of the world that are experiencing conflict and war, and all the accompanying suffering, loss of life, and destruction of communities and livelihoods brought about by the atrocities carried out by people to one another. We pray for the people of Israel, Palestine, Gaza, and Iran, Haiti, Honduras and El Salvador, who are experiencing escalating direct military and militant attacks in these regions thereby creating further instability, and eroding hopes for peacekeeping efforts. O God, we pray for lasting peace for our world.

You come to us in the primal pain of so many people, animals, and the earth who are suffering because of war, natural disaster, economic and political instability and human injustices. Help us to be compassionate, show loving kindness, and be willing to offer what we are able to support others in their suffering and in their healing.

You come to us in the hopelessness of those living in poverty, the homeless, the lost, the bereaved, the orphaned, ... You come to us, O God, to ourselves, our families and friends, those who we know are ill, undergoing treatment, and those recovering, those who are lonely, anxious, confused or stressed. Make known to them the wholeness You alone can bring.

You come, O God, to all who work for peace, for reconciliation, for restoration, reconciliation, reconstruction, for healing, for justice and for hope for those who live a life beyond what is dehumanizing.

You come to us, O God, in your Church, its Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, all pastors, lay workers and leaders, musicians, missionaries, and diaconal ministers; We pray for First Lutheran in Vancouver – Rev. David Lefsrud (Interim), Lutheran campus ministries and campus chaplains in BC Synod; the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara. God of resurrection equip pastors and lay leaders, that they may listen well and by Your power share the good news of the Gospel.

You are ever present with us, O God in all our circumstances, guiding and guarding, leading and loving us. May we be open to hearing Your voice and following You. May we be transformed by the power of Your Holy Spirit to be your hands and feet in bringing Your kingdom of justice, love and peace near. Christ is risen! Alleluia!

ALLELUIA! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Our Father ...