

## Power to Heal

sermon digest

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Acts 3:1-13, 16

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It had certainly been the high point in the church's young life. Still wet behind the ears, the church had witnessed people "from every nation under heaven" coming forward to believe in Jesus and be baptized. Some say as many as 3,000 new members were added. Who, pray tell, could top that? And actually, no one was even trying. They gathered together, basking in the afterglow, soaking up the apostles' teaching, relishing the rich fellowship, breaking bread, praying, sharing all they had with glad and generous hearts. They were days of awe and praise, as wonders continued to unfold in their midst. Why leave? Why go anywhere else? Why open their doors to anyone else? Reminiscent of Peter's question of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, some may have even been thinking in terms of building permanent sanctuaries and just hanging out in that mountaintop experience forever. They had it all.

But, no. They did go to church—well, more accurately, they went to Temple—everyday. And as often happens when you go to church, you encounter people along the way. For those of us with a practical sense, with lowered expectations, you might say, the trip to church is uneventful. Uneventful, other than the usual nervous fidgeting and fuming. Hurry! We're going to be late. Keep your eyes on the road! Don't let anyone get in the way! It's not a time for distractions. It's a time for accomplishing the purpose at hand. And if any do get in the way, for goodness sake, go around them, cross on the other side if you must!

But there he was. Right where he had been every other day of the week. It was three o'clock in the afternoon—high mass, you might say, the hour when sacrifices were offered, the most important hour to be present, front and center. You could toss him a few coins and keep going, but there was absolutely no need to slow your pace. He probably had been out drinking all night anyway. Everyone, after all, knows what *they* are like.

And yet, there he was—right by the door. Outside the door, obviously. At least those who had carried him in and placed him there had the good taste not to carry him inside. Some argue that it would have been unlawful to do so. The argument is somewhat fierce about whether he could have passed through the doors to the Temple at all. People with disabilities in *that* day were not treated very kindly. As a matter of fact, they were often treated with ridicule and contempt. "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" It was a pious, even self-righteous question, but a favorite topic of debate for the day.

Think back, if you will, to the story buried deep in scripture. David, seeking to extend kindness to the household of Saul, seeks out Saul's one surviving heir—Mephibosheth, son of David's beloved friend, Jonathan. Mephibosheth, "lame in both his feet," responded to David's kindness with a self-characterization mirroring the attitudes of his day: "What is your servant, that you should look upon a dead dog such as I?" (2 Samuel 9:8). Mephibosheth had, you might say, internalized the common view of persons with disabilities in his day. He saw himself to be pathetic, impotent, despicable, unworthy of notice and certainly unworthy of any kindness.

"The blind and the lame shall not come into the house," a rule attributed to the time of David, had been expanded in the Greek translation of scriptures a century or two prior to the church's birth to read specifically "the blind and the lame shall not come into the house of *the Lord*" (2 Sam. 5:8). And the Torah itself forbade "blemished" priests from offering sacrifice to God (Lev. 21:16-18), much on the order of Greek and Roman religions, which excluded those with "blemishes" from their priesthood. Priests, Plato for example insisted, must "be whole in body and leg"; and in ancient Achaia, the boy selected to be priest of Zeus was the boy who had won a beauty contest. Admission to the priesthood of Apollo was reserved for the good looking and strong; and the Romans likewise restricted the priesthood to those who had no bodily "defect" (M. Parsons, *Journal of Biblical Literature* (2005), 304+).

Lest we be too quick to click our tongues at the legalism of first century Judaism or at the primitive mind set that rendered the disabled outsiders among their own people and within their own religious communities in particular, I am reminded of the uphill struggle of a bright, gifted seminary student mentored by Larry in Louisville a couple of decades ago. Stricken by polio as a small child, he

maneuvered the rolling seminary campus with crutches and graduated seminary to confront decidedly unenthusiastic churches looking for an able-bodied minister. How could he perform baptisms, after all?! I recall, too, the added frustration when his minister father refused to help him find a church because he did not have an appropriate view of millennialism. Some matters in the Christian faith are front and center, after all!

I recall, too, the uphill struggle of women and gays and lesbians to receive ordination in the church as well as the unthinking but still thoughtless architecture of churches through the centuries when they were built atop a huge obstacle of impressive, but for the disabled, impassable steps, thus excluding them from much the church gathered to do. I also remember a nationwide Christian organization that came to my college campus some years ago with the design of first winning the athletes and popular students to Christ so that the nobodies among us would meekly follow along in their path.

To speak of the lame man outside the Beautiful Gate as an outsider is not so much, then, a statement of self-righteous condemnation as it is a reminder, a call for sensitivity within ourselves to the struggle individuals with disabilities and families of children with disabilities must wage. It is a call not just to feelings of compassion, but to attention to and active support of initiatives to open doors for them to full participation both in society and in the body of Christ.

Luke, the presumed writer of Acts, paints his stories of healing in a way that is nothing short of enacted parables crafted to say something significant about God and the shape faithfulness to Christ must take. In the story of the healing of the lame man, Luke goes to great lengths to point out how focused Peter and John are upon the man and his need: "Peter *looked intently* at him, as did John, and said, "*Look at us.*" And the man "fixed his attention on them" (Acts 3:4-5). More than an impediment on the way to prayer, the man and his need, Luke is telling us, is brought into focus by our prayers. Contrary to the old hymn, "Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer, that calls me from a world of care," prayer becomes the lens through which the need and suffering of our world are brought into focus. Or as William Willimon put it, "The path toward significant prayer is a way that goes straight through, not around, human misery" [William Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, 43-44].

The man looked at Peter, "expecting to receive something". "I have no silver or gold," Peter tells him, "but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Peter raised the man to his feet and "his feet and ankles were made strong"; and jumping up, "he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God" (3:7-8). He who had spent his life as an outsider was now an insider. He who had been the object of ridicule and abuse now leapt for joy. The prophetic hope of Israel had resided in just that sort of hope. The age of deliverance, the age that greeted the coming of Messiah, would see the healing, the liberation of God's people from all that encumbered them. Hear Isaiah's word of hope:

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. . . . He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then *the lame shall leap like a deer*, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (35:3-6).

Just as the healing stories of Jesus pointed beyond themselves to Jesus' identity as the one who should come, so the healing stories of the early church point beyond themselves to the power of their Risen Lord.

"Such as I have," Peter told the man, "I will give to you." A story that has long circulated in the church is the story of Thomas Aquinas or Saint Dominic, depending on the version of the story you encounter, visiting the pope in the Vatican. Moving through the elaborate structure with his visitor, the pope motions to the architectural magnificence that surrounds them. "No longer need the church say with Peter," the pope says to his guest, "silver and gold have I none." "True," his guest quickly responds, "but neither can it say 'take up your bed and walk.'"

The story may well be apocryphal. It does, however, raise a significant question for the church. What is the proper nature of the church's power, and wherein resides its power to heal? Far from a story we can conveniently use to pillage the Roman Catholic Church, it is a story that should give each of us pause who care about the church's identity and mission in the world today.

Some years ago, Lyle Schaller, a widely known church growth consultant, observed the direct link between the size of a church's building and the amount of time the pastor and the congregation spent consumed with the building's protection and care. Oftentimes, he observed, the church could not find the people, particularly those outside the church, because the building got in the way. He also noted the linkage between a church's mortgage and the commitment of its people to stay together. Fear of financial failure can become so primary in a church that everything else is put on the back burner. Rocking the boat, taking the risk of reaching out to outsiders, doing anything in a way other than they have always been done are all put aside in the interest of meeting the mortgage. Knowing that a note burning often precedes unrest and the breaking apart of the fellowship, some churches even make the commitment to stay perpetually in debt as a means of securing the membership. Amassing property and indebtedness is a poor way, however, of securing peace; and despite the image of success it paints in the world that surrounds us, it does not assure for the church the power of healing.

Frightened by dropping membership rolls and evidences that in our increasingly diverse society, the church does not enjoy the power it once knew, some are trying the route of political maneuvering as a means to shore up the church's power. "God," they say, "has been expelled from our public classrooms," and they are seeking to regain the upper hand by rewriting textbooks and demanding allegiance to their own personal interpretations. Judge Penny White shared with Women's Interfaith Dialogue last week her own concern for Christian coalitions of various shapes and sizes across our nation who are devising religious tests in an effort to manipulate the make-up of our courts and legislatures. In both instances, you get the image of an embattled church constructing around itself a fortress containment to shore up its power and assure its dominance in the world. This wrestled power, taken, if you will, by deceptive, manipulative force, contains within itself not the seeds of healing, but of bitter division and an increasingly angry backlash against the church and all people of faith.

"Such as I have," Peter said to the lame man, "I will give you." There he and John stood, totally lacking in either wealth or political power. Their next stop, as a matter of fact, would be the jail. The power they did possess, however, was a healing power. "Stand up and walk," they commanded; and the man didn't just stand, he leapt and danced with joy. Perhaps it is just there that the church's proper power resides—not in the power of domination but in the readiness to put what we have and who we are on the line.

"Such as I have, I will give you." Freed to see those whom society seeks to keep invisible, and freed to serve by the gracious welcome we have met in Christ and share within his joyous fellowship, we give ourselves to his healing purposes in the world today.

So, hear the good news: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. . . . He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy" (35:3-6).

I don't know about you; but to me, that sounds like very good news. Thanks be to God!