

Miracle at the Beautiful Gate

Acts 3:1-19

Let's take a moment to enter the scene of today's Scripture reading. Sitting at one of the Temple gates, presumably between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of Israel, is a man paralyzed since birth. His legs are wizened, atrophied from years of non-use. He is probably dressed in tattered and dirty clothes. (I don't know of too many well-dressed beggars.) Because he must sit, he is out of view to many of the people coming to the Temple that day. Although he is there every day, he has become almost invisible to the people coming to Temple for the time of prayer. I find it somewhat ironic, or is it prophetic, that this unattractive and unkempt person should spend his days at the gate called Beautiful. Why prophetic? Just wait to see what happens next.

Among the many people coming to the Temple are Peter and John, disciples of Christ. They are familiar with this man; they have seen him there before. Today they pass close enough for the man to call to them, "Alms for the poor?"

As he calls out to them, he probably assumes a position of supplication, head bowed, and hands raised holding a small bowl to collect their alms. He is not looking at these men. He may be looking at his wizened legs, cursing his misfortune at having to live this way, all the while waiting to hear a few coins falling into his begging bowl. Perhaps he isn't looking

at anything, eyes shut tight against the stares and gestures of those who pass.

The beggar is familiar with these fellows he has asked for alms. He saw them here before with that man, Jesus. Word on the street says people are selling their possessions and giving their money to the disciples. These two might be good for a hefty gift today.

Peter and John look at the man and see a creation of God. Wholly acceptable in the sight of the Christ they serve. They are able to see past the shabby clothes, the shriveled limbs, and dirty rug, to the person God created him to be. They want to share their vision with the man and both say, “Look at me!”

He responds by lifting his head and opening his eyes, expecting something from them. What he receives far surpasses his humble request for alms. His response to this gift is to make sure everyone knows what has happened. We are told he leapt! That alone would get people’s attention. Then he walks and leaps into the Temple praising God. Now it makes sense that he sat at the gate called Beautiful! It’s difficult to imagine a more beautiful scene than to see one who has been so disabled suddenly able to not only walk, but to leap for joy.

As amazing as that story is, it’s not the main feature in this reading. This miracle sparks people’s curiosity and they start crowding around Peter and John. Since the man is holding on to them, it is assumed that

they are the source of this miracle. Would we be any different? There is a natural human hunger to find that one person or thing that will heal all our ills. Whether it's some gimmicky dietary supplement or TV self-help guru, we find ourselves drawn to the promise of something that will eliminate our problems for us.

Let's pause for a moment and think about times when something astonishing has happened in our lifetimes. While the bombing of Pearl Harbor was before my time, I've heard that people crowded churches to pray for those lost, those going to war, and for our country. The same happened 20 years ago with the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Churches saw crowds not seen in years. Kind of a shame it takes something out of the ordinary to get people to do something that used to be very ordinary. People gathered to ask God why, how, and what's next. People gathered to find answers, just like the people pouring into the Temple to see the miracle of the lame man walking.

Peter was aware of the crowd's desire for a "get fixed quick" healing and used the opportunity to address their error. He starts with a challenge to their thinking:

"Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

Many of these folks had witnessed the miracles done by Jesus. They would know that these men had not performed healings on their own. Why would they start to think that now?

Peter continued:

“¹³ The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.

¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.”

Oh, boy! Are these folks in for it now! Peter speaks words that sound like condemnation. You are the ones who killed the miracle worker! Unfortunately, many people over the years have used these words to bolster ideas of anti-Semitism. But if we continue reading what Peter has to say, we understand that to do so is complete folly.

¹⁶ By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.

Peter says in effect, you may have killed the body of Jesus, but His Spirit lives on in the power of His name and is powerful even after His death and resurrection to perform miracles.

How many in hearing range of Peter were ready to duck and cover in anticipation of the lightning bolt with their name on it? Peter has just held these people responsible for the death of Jesus, Son of God, Messiah foretold by the prophets of old. Is there any escape from judgment? Well, here's the part I don't think anyone listening to Peter was prepared for:

¹⁷ “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. ¹⁸ But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹ Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,¹

Peter says, you may be feeling condemned at this moment, but don't despair! You didn't understand. You made a big blunder, but there is a way past your error, both in your response to Jesus and your misunderstanding about who is responsible for this man's healing. The message is the same one brought by John the Baptist, and by Jesus, REPENT! Turn, or return, to the God of our fathers. He is willing to wipe out your sins and pour out His gracious healing on all of you, if you will only humble yourself before Him.

How many of us today misunderstand life with God, like those gathered in the Temple that day? We think that misery is the rule and healing is

an astounding exception. Do we miss the good that God is doing every day in our lives and around us in the world? Are we living with a glass half full outlook on life? The people in the Temple that day had been living under the shadow of Rome, a dreary and despondent kind of living. After a year under lockdown for Coronavirus, it's easy for many of us to see life in a similar way. So, when something good does happen, it tends to take us by surprise. Are we able to see the hand of God in those astounding exceptions?

And what is our response to these astounding exceptions? Do we see them as calls for repentance, as Peter explains? Whenever we see signs of God at work—someone is healed of a debilitating or life-threatening disease, a broken relationship is repaired, children living in poverty are fed and educated, nations put down weapons to begin working toward peace – it is then that despair yields to hope and people of faith are full of wonder and joy. But Peter tells us that such events call for an even deeper response, the difficult task of self-reflection. God's healing and restoring work shows us another way of being in a world that appears to be devolving into chaos.

In response to God's mercy, shown all around us, our response shouldn't just be, "Isn't that nice," but to make a change, to repent, and become God's agents in the world today. We are to open our eyes to what is going on around us. Ask God how He wants us to take part in what He

is doing. And trust that in the power of the name of Jesus, change will come, both in ourselves and our world. May it be so!

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