

At our Tuesday morning lectio group, as we study the text for coming Sunday, we often pick out a word or phrase that seems to speak loudly to us personally as we hear the text read out loud in a reflective manner. This last week, the word that stood out for one participant was “immediately”; as in “*immediately* his feet and ankles were made strong and he jumped up.” This word stood out because this was a person who, like many of us, had at one time had injuries in the legs or ankles or foot that caused mobility problems. And for her, as for most of us, there was no “immediately” about that fix whatsoever. We’ve had several people in this last year who have broken or injured their lower limbs or who have needed surgery impacting their feet or legs. The aftermath of the injury and/or surgery is typically weeks and months of pain control, physical therapy, and exercises. These people I’m thinking of may or may not be *yet* able to walk, leap, and praise God, unlike the lame man in our lesson. So, there’s a bit of disconnect between the experience of this unnamed lame man and the experience of many of us in the present. I think reading this story and recognizing those disconnects leaves us with a number of legitimate questions: Why does this lame man get an immediate fix, while we do not? Why are the disciples able to work such a miracle, while we are not? And most importantly, what was the crucial factor that allowed for this miracle to happen?

So, last week, when we read verses from Acts 1, we learned that the disciples, after Jesus’ resurrection, encountered the risen Christ a number of times, prior to his Ascension, which we pondered last week. This morning we’re in Acts 3, so what about Acts 2? Well, in the second chapter of Acts, we have the story of Pentecost, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, at which time thousands were baptized and the fledgling Christian church was born. We’re going to circle back to that lesson on the festival of Pentecost on May 19. The disciples remained in Jerusalem following that event, and continued to both proclaim the Risen Christ *and* to attend Jewish hours of prayer at the Temple. This is what brings them into contact with the lame man in our lesson.

This unfortunate man was lame from birth. He had never known the joy of running exuberantly across the ground, of leaping into a body of water, of dancing or simply of walking. This meant he also never knew

the self-sufficiency or dignity of work or the satisfaction of supporting a family and home. From the moment of his birth as a lame boy, he was essentially consigned to being a beggar. There was no other social net in place for the handicapped; begging *was* the social net. So much so that others cooperated in his efforts for survival by daily bringing him to the Temple and setting him up by a particular gateway there, so that he could call out for alms, gifts of money, from those who walked by him into the Temple. This may mean that Peter and John had seen him before, and he may have seen them before, as he was always present, and they made a custom of attending hours of prayer at the temple. But, I'm going to suggest that although the lame man, Peter, and John may have seen each other before and all likely had adequate vision, they had never *really seen* one another before. Why would that be? Because like us, Peter and John likely regularly averted their eyes from beggars. You know how when we see people holding signs at street corners requesting food or money, we generally feel uncomfortable and uncertain and just look away? We see them, but we don't *actually see* them.

And likewise, those making those requests for money often feel embarrassed or awkward and just hold out their cup for alms, or their hands for the cash, without making any kind of prolonged eye contact. They are about a business transaction, not looking to make friends and influence people. When you think about it, all of us see any number of people without actually *really seeing* them, from the cashier behind the counter to the wait staff at the restaurant to the drivers of public transport and so on. And *they* may not really see *us*, either, because we're just one more face in a stream of faces with whom they're doing business. This is almost an unspoken rule of conduct amongst our human species, to avoid eye contact and genuine seeing, but the rule is about to be broken by Peter and John.

Because Peter and John do the unusual; instead of just averting their eyes and hurrying past the beggar into the Temple, we read, "Peter *looked intently* at him, as did John". That's not standard behavior, is it? How often do we look intently at people we *know*, much less those we *don't* know? Not only do they look intently at him---*really seeing* him as an individual---but they make the same demand in return. "*Look at us*", Peter challenges the man. Think how rarely we say that phrase to anyone---"Look at me. Pay attention". Doesn't happen very often. Maybe with a child whom we're disciplining, but that's about it. But the man obeys and

*fixes* his attention on them, expecting to receive his alm. Which suggests that he has broken with *his* usual comfortable distance from his sources of income and is actually *seeing them too*. But his expectations are initially disappointed. Peter begins, “I have no silver or gold”, like us saying---"sorry, can't help you, I left my wallet at home". However, the lame man has set his expectations *too low*. Because Peter continues,” but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” The man is looking for a hand-out; Peter offers him mobility. The man is looking for a band-aid; Peter offers a cure. The man is looking to get through one more day of his limited existence; Peter offers him a miracle instead. We read, “Immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.” All these verses may bring to mind for some of us a Bible school or Sunday School song, yes? It's a catchy song and it's a catchy story. But again, a story with some disconnects from our usual experience. Now to our questions from the beginning of this sermon: *Why* does this lame man get an immediate fix, while *we* do not? Why are the *disciples* able to work such a miracle, while *we* are not? And most importantly, what was the crucial factor that *allowed* for this miracle to happen?

First, why this immediate fix for the lame man? C.S. Lewis has written that miracles are God doing in a hurry what usually takes a longer time. *Our* time of recovery from mobility impairing issues is often *quite* long; why does God hurry along this process in this particular instance? Part of the answer could be in the verses which follow today's lesson. We read how amazed all present in the Temple were at this miracle. In the next verses, Peter takes advantage of that amazement to do some proclamation of the Gospel of the risen Christ, and he finds a ready audience. This miracle not only changed the life of the lame man, but it was a springboard, used by the Holy Spirit, to keep that fledgling and fragile early Church in the process of building and growing. In fact, in spite of the authorities arresting Peter and John for creating a ruckus in just a few more verses, we learn that “many of those who heard believed; and they numbered about 5000.” God had more than one agenda in mind here, we might say, more than one miracle was being worked. But this kind of occurrence is the *exception, not the rule*.

That's true of the answer for the second question also: Why were the *disciples* able to work such miracles, when we are not? We understand, I think, that the Incarnate Son of God, Christ Jesus, worked miracles of healing and provision very naturally. That makes sense. But why could the *disciples* do so also? Let's recognize that the early disciples *did* work some miracles of healing, perhaps faith healing, we'd call it? About ½ dozen such miracles are recorded throughout the history of the early church in the book of Acts. But *only* about a half dozen among all those people and all those years. In other words, this *wasn't* a common every day happening for them *either*. The disciples lived through all kinds of days, weeks, months, and years *without* working miraculous healings, but none of that gets written down for our consideration. That's why this healing was greeted with such amazement and wonder by all those present, and that's why it provided so excellent a springboard for Peter's proclamation. Some specific ingredients came together in this story of God's intent, Peter and John's willingness, and the circumstances of the lame man at that place and time. Furthermore, throughout Acts, it's very clear that it's not the *disciples* who work miracles; it's the Holy Spirit working with or through the disciples. It doesn't involve *their* piety or power; it involves the activity and power of the Holy Spirit. So, such miracles were absolutely rare and marvelous for those in the 1<sup>st</sup> C. just as the occasional miracles we sometimes hear about now are rare and marvelous. They are the *exception*, not the rule. It's the *amazing* that gets into print, not the normative. Far more often, God works through and alongside natural laws, and through and alongside regular human efforts to bring about restoration, healing, and new beginnings. Miracles are *always* the exception, happening for some exceptional reason or set of reasons. No point in beating ourselves up either because we don't receive miraculous healing or because we don't seem to make it happen. The lame man isn't healed because of his magnificent faith; he didn't *have* faith, he was looking for a handout and was completely gob smacked when healing happened instead. So, it's totally false to say that we or others aren't the recipients of miraculous healing because we lack faith. And Peter and John, along with other early disciples, worked rare and exceptional miracles, not because they were so far above us in discipleship, but because the Holy Spirit was working with them in a specific time and place and way to accomplish some specific purposes. So, our relative inability to receive or work miracles is *not* a reflection on

our faith and discipleship; it's rather a reflection of the reality that God very rarely intervenes in the natural order that *God created in the first place*. And the few times that happens, it tends to get put in print, so we read about it. That doesn't make it the norm.

So let's move on, then, to the most important question: What was the crucial factor that *allowed* for this miracle to happen? Because *this* factor we can and do replicate, and when we do so, good things happen. The factor was this: genuine connection. Peter and John *looked intently* at the lame man; the lame man, at their request, *fixed his attention* upon them. Those are the precise words used. They had a *moment*: a moment of connection. They didn't avert their eyes, pass by one another at a comfortable distance, see one another without actually seeing each other at all. They gave each other the dignity of recognizing each other as human individuals on this planet instead of being just one more member of the human race that we're trying to move past with as little bother as possible. Here's the crucial takeaway: establishing genuine connection with another human allows space for the Holy Spirit to work. By *really* seeing each other, these three in our story created a space in which the Holy Spirit could work a miracle. *That's* what was required---connecting on a genuine level that granted dignity and respect and recognition of the humanity in those involved. Peter and John weren't just two more easy marks for scoring alms. The lame man wasn't just one more beggar to ignore. They established the connection which created the space for the Holy Spirit to act. And doing so takes time and effort and maybe even courage on our part. But this is something we *can do*. Big, dramatic miracles may not result when we make such an effort, but I'm guessing any number of small and still important miracles *do* happen at such times. God *always* sees us as individuals, *always* affords us that dignity and graciousness. That's how God makes connections with *us*. We can do the same for one another, allowing God space to work healing, reconciliation, or new starts, in big or small ways. Creating those connections, that space, is all about how we see. Which is why our hymn of the day prays that *we* will see as *God* sees: "Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart." Amen.