

Third Weekend of Easter (RCL/B)  
Acts 3:12-19  
April 14, 2018  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

On a recent trip to New York City I stopped to give money to a man I saw on the sidewalk, begging. That's unusual for me. But he was more elderly than most, looked sober, and was sitting on one of those walkers equipped with a seat. Maybe thinking of my mom, I was overwhelmed with sadness that a senior citizen is reduced to soliciting change from passers-by to buy his next meal. I gave him a \$5. I know that's just a small drop in his ocean of need, but it's better than a handful of coins.

There's another panhandler who doesn't appear **directly** in today's first lesson from Acts because we're airlifted in, mid-story, but, he's there, standing on the sidelines, the cause of quite a commotion. He's the one Peter is talking about when he asks the crowd:

*"... why do you wonder at this... why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (Acts 3:12)*

Here's the backstory we learn earlier in this 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of the Book of Acts. There was a man lame from birth whose family or friends dropped him off at the entrance to the temple every day before 3, so he could beg, since his handicap prevented him from making a living any other way. He or they were business-savvy; that location was prime real estate and that time was optimal for anyone looking for handouts. Jews serious about practicing their faith prayed **and** gave alms – in other words, helped the destitute. Catching them on their way into the 3 p.m. prayer meeting greatly boosted one's chances of being a recipient of their generosity -- and of going home with one's begging bowl filled.

So the lame man hits up Peter and John as they walk into the temple. Peter then does and says something unexpected:

*Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." (Acts 3:4)*

Now I don't know about you, but (true confessions) when I intend to ignore a panhandler (which is most of the time) I work hard to avoid eye contact. Peter does the opposite by actually saying, "Look at us!" I'm thinking this raised the man's hopes. Eye contact is a mild form of intimacy, right? Who's going to look someone in the eye in order to announce, "I'm not giving **you** a dime!"? Not likely.

This story has captured my heart from way back when, and what Peter said next may be one of the earliest verses of Scripture I memorized ('not so hard, because it's so poetic):

*"Of silver and gold I have none, but what I have I give to you:  
in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, get up and walk!" (Acts 3:6)*

I'm thinking this is the **first** time in more than 40 years that this lame man walked. (We find out his age later in the story, Acts 4:22). So he gets up, all right! St. Luke uses a wonderful verb to describe what happens: our friend doesn't just stand and walk, he **leaps!** This is beautiful fulfillment of the promise we find in Isaiah 35:6:

*...then the lame shall leap like a deer...*

It's also mirroring what our Lord told John the Baptist's disciples to tell John in response to the question of whether Jesus was the Messiah:

*"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, **the lame walk**, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them...." (Luke 7:22)*

The man is made whole in more ways than one – now he can walk, and now he can **worship**. When he begged, it was **outside** the gate of the temple: his handicap made him ritually unworthy to enter. Once he can walk, he enters the temple precincts with Peter and John, probably to worship with them. He's now a full member of the community.

Peter makes sure, in today's first lesson, that no one thinks he or John pulled this healing off on their own. The glory belongs to God. Here's what Peter said, in the paraphrase from *The Message*:

*"Faith in Jesus' name put this man, whose condition you know so well, on his feet—yes, faith and nothing but faith put this man healed and whole right before your eyes."*  
(Acts 3:16)

Interesting. It's not the faith of the lame man he's talking about, is it? **It's Peter and John's faith** that the risen Lord is present and powerful to heal, to make what's lame leap, to mend what's broken, to move those who were **outside** the gate **inside**, to make those who were **apart from** the community **a part of** the community.

Peter calls "all the people" to claim God's healing power for themselves by repenting. This speech (of which we hear only a part today) is a lot like the Pentecost sermon Peter preached, but he's really ratcheting up the rhetoric now. Then he did point out how they had handed Jesus over to be:

*...crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. (Acts 2:23)*

This time his message is way harsher. Twice he mentions how the people **rejected** God's **servant** Jesus, the **Holy and Righteous One**, whom they had handed over. He continues:

*...and [you] asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the **Author of life**, whom God raised from the dead. (Acts 3:13-15)*

Other than that, their hands are clean.... It's a damning indictment. But then Peter offers holy medicine for their spiritual disease in the last verse of today's lesson:

*Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out. (Acts 3:19)*

It's not Lent anymore, but we're still hearing about sin and repentance and forgiveness. Wherever and whenever the risen Lord appears (including where two or more of us are gathered in His name), the light of truth shines on our sickness and our sin, and healing is offered. As

members of the Body of Christ, the Church, we are to offer the gift of healing like Peter and John did. We can never be so intent on entering the temple to pray that we overlook the beggar lying at the gate. Sometimes we minister to the lame man by putting \$5 in his begging bowl, and sometimes we give that money to Lutheran Social Ministries or Lutheran World Relief or Lutheran Disaster Response or Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to offer a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of the impoverished. We are called also to offer the gift of advocacy to lobby for more just and compassionate laws and more robust programs to serve the sick, the hungry, the unemployed, the refugee, the single parent, the unwed mother, the addict, the mentally ill. These are all folks consigned to the outside perimeter of the temple of social acceptance, financial independence, family stability, spiritual peace.

But we are not only like Peter and John, with ministry to perform. We are like the lame man, thinking we know what we came for (coins to buy dinner), actually in need of the healing which will enable us not just to walk but to leap. St. Paul says we don't even know **what** to pray for, but that the Spirit prays for us with sighs too deep for words. What a gift....

Next week we'll hear how Peter and John got into hot water for allowing God's healing grace to be channeled through them into the lame man's life. It reminds us that there is a cost to the healer.... There certainly was to our Lord Jesus. Maybe part of the cost is not knowing whether we're being scammed by the panhandler on the street. Maybe part of the cost is the anger toward advocates of those who prefer a certain part of the population to remain voiceless. We who were baptized in the name of Jesus are called to mediate His saving, healing presence, though, come what may. Amen

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