

Acts 3: 1-10

3 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. ² And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³ When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴ Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶ But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." ⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸ Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹ All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰ and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

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"Where the Wind Blows: Healing the Beggar"

Play with the scene in your imaginations. See a beggar who sits at the bottom of the cathedral's steps. A church bell is announcing worship is about to begin. So the beggar strategically positions himself in the main artery of the entrance and takes off his hat to collect his payday. "Alms, alms," he says. People pass him by, their heels clicking on the pavement as they climb the steps to the sanctuary. Some drop coins in as they rush to get a pew seat. Some generous folks drop in a crisp \$5. "God bless you," his reply. "God bless you." The beggar knows that before church and after is prime time to make some decent cash. He is aware that religious types try to earn their way to heaven. It's not that he's being malicious, it's just how he's learned to cope with his situation. He knows the ins and outs of a beggar's life. "Alms, alms," he recites as the people keep moving by.

For starters, we admit we are familiar with the scene. We pass by the beggar all the time. There we are sitting at a stoplight, minding our own business, listening to NPR, when a stranger starts tapping on the car window. Out of the corner of our eye we see the beggar with his palm out. "Alms, alms." Or maybe we open the mailbox discovering a letter from World Vision. A sad looking child stares up at us with desperate eyes. "For \$2/day you can help!" The non-profit is begging on the behalf of the beggar. You know, just this week someone knocked on the church sanctuary door asking for cash to do their dirty laundry. "Alms, alms." Perhaps we church folk have a generous look about us, like bullseyes on our backs, we are a magnet for beggars. So, we've learned to recite our rehearsed lines: "I'm sorry I don't have any money on me." Or we've learned to walk the downtown streets diverting our gaze. We know that the trick to getting past a beggar is to not look at them.

But notice what Peter and John do: they stop. They look "intently into the man's eyes." They see a real person with a story. Then they say, "Look at me." And a relationship is beginning to form between the two of them as are now staring into each other's eyes.

"Look at me," says the disciples, "I have no gold or silver, but what I have I give to you freely. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, in the name of the Lord *and the Liberator*, get up and walk!" Then

Peter reaches down and raises the beggar to his feet—it's the same Greek word used when God raises Jesus, by the way. And the man, who is now 'formerly known as the beggar' begins to not only walk, but starts leaping with joy into church. The outsider is now the insider and everyone is surprised. The beggar certainly didn't expect it. The church he goes into is amazed because they don't expect it. Maybe we have learned to lower our expectations too, because we certainly don't expect it either.

Reminds me of a story about a woman who lived at an adult home which is located next to a church. One day she decides to visit in the back row. She was very overweight and hadn't bathed in awhile. She wouldn't speak or make eye contact with anyone. She snored loudly during the sermons. On several occasions, she would forget where she was and light up a cigarette. So the church council met to complain. "She doesn't belong here," someone said, "I'm tithing to the church and she's just giving pennies." "She's eating too many cookies at coffee hour." Then someone made the point, "She's scaring away other visitors!" Finally, an exacerbated council member announced she would sit next to her and be the woman's neighbor. So when the snoring started, she would give the woman a gentle nudge with her elbow. When the woman would take out her smokes, she would put them away for her. She got her three cookies and sat next to her during coffee hour. Soon the outsider began talking to other people and began looking them in the eyes.

Some months later the woman's social worker called the church. He said that this woman had never been accepted by any group, or was ever able to sustain a healthy relationship until she was welcomed into the church. "Now, I have never been to your church" the social worker said, "but it must be an exceptional place." "Exceptional?" the pastor asked. "Well," he said, "she is telling everyone what the Lord has done for her." For her it is nothing short of a miracle.

Now beloved, hear me well. You have the same exceptional Spirit about you. You bear the same calling to be a community for those who are begging to belong. You have the authority of healing, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of the Liberator.

Of course, it will be tempting to step back and say, "I can't fix the problem" or "I don't have the ability" or "I don't want the responsibility." Except it's not our job to fix anything, but to use authority we've been given to bring healing and hospitality whenever the situation presents itself.

Because the truth is: we are all beggars before God. Wasn't it Mother Teresa who when asked about her calling responded, "What am I, but a beggar who leads other beggars to a meal?" We all have our hand outstretched to God at some point.

Begging for a relationship to lift the loneliness.

Begging for relief from the depression.

Begging for justice for our African American sisters and brothers.

Begging for sanctuary for immigrant mothers and fathers whose family is about to be torn apart.

Begging for politicians to wake up to the immanent needs of our environment.

Begging for corporations to give downriver communities access to clean water.

We are all begging for relief from something in a world full of suffering, and to be brought back to our feet, by the authority of the Spirit, after life knocks us down.

But you see, the point of the story is not that the beggar is healed—everyone Jesus heals or the disciples heal will eventually die, they are simply prolonging the inevitable. No, the point is that there is holiness in our midst. And when we are in the presence of holiness, *anything is possible*.

The Holy Spirit of Pentecost will not rest until the hurting find relief and the outsider belongs inside community. We have the authority—the calling!—to bring healing into each other’s lives, in the name of our Lord and Liberator. What is needed is for us to take responsibility and use it.