

**Acts 3: 1-16**  
**April 22, 2012**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**

The story we just heard from the Acts of the Apostles stirs up many feelings in me about helping people in need. But two things strike me in particular.

First of all notice this: Caring people daily carried this man to the gate of the Temple in order that he could beg for alms. This is ministry. The people who did this went out of their way every day to perform this act of compassion. It doesn't say so, but we may assume that at the end of the day they carried him home. Whatever else we may say about this passage we must never say that the people who brought the man to the Temple gate were failing. Had no one brought the man to the Temple gate he would never have encountered Peter and the disciples. There would be no story.

From this I hope we understand that everybody has a gift of ministry. Every gift is important. The fact that someone else with *another* gift performs what seems like a miracle should *never* diminish the acts of service which prepared the way.

I say this because we so often devalue our acts of ministry. We look around us and say, "I only do this little thing. But I see so and so doing all these other things. My service is not important." If your gift is the ministry of helping someone survive until the moment of transformation, **DON'T STOP!** Keep helping at the food cupboard. Keep serving meals at City Mission. Keep giving rides. Keep visiting people in hospitals and nursing homes. Keep sending cards to the sick and bereaved. Bring people to fellowship events. Invite people to brunch after church. Serve in the ministries of the church. Sing in the choir. Most importantly, pray for people and for yourself. Come to worship. Invite

others to worship. All of these things fall under the important category of bringing people to the gate of the Temple.

The eyes which meet Peters have never known hope. The eyes that return Peter's gaze have known only the daily struggle simply to survive. He has no aspirations. He is grateful to the ones who bring him to the gate and he cannot imagine that anyone would offer him anything more than a few coins to help him survive to another day.

This morning, before we go any farther, I invite you to sit with this man. Sense his belief that his condition is permanent and there is nothing more to expect from life than this daily routine of being utterly dependent on others simply to survive. He is paralyzed not only by his physical condition. He is paralyzed by the belief that his life is fixed. He will always be a crippled beggar. He will always be an object of charity and discomfort. Worst of all, to most of the people pass by going through the Temple gate he will be invisible. Even the people who drop a coin at his feet won't look at him. Even if they look at him they won't *see* him. They won't see *him*, the human being the child of God. They will literally and figuratively look down on him. They will feel better that they have helped this man and even better that they are not like him.

So this man is unprepared for what happens when Peter and John stop in front of him. The scripture says that Peter looks at him *intently*—that is, Peter looks *into* him, with *intent*. In short we may say that Peter *sees* the human being that *is* the man. He is no longer a cripple. He is no longer a beggar. He is no longer an object of pity or charity. He is a *child of God*. Indeed, I propose to you that when Peter looks into the eyes of the

beggar he sees with the eyes of Jesus Christ. He sees a soul yearning to be redeemed; a soul yearning to move beyond the gate of the Temple to the interior.

In order to do this I imagine that Peter squats or kneels to bring himself to the man's eye level. It is very difficult to look into another's eyes when you are looking down on them. Truly to see another human being as who they are we must assume the position of identity. We must discover that, whatever our worldly condition and outward circumstance, in God's sight we are of equal value.

I received an email message which told the story of a church where a boy came, essentially abandoned in the world. He came to church ill clothed, dirty and often ill behaved. Even though they knew, the congregation was too embarrassed to ask who his father was. His father was notorious. And so the child became a source of unspoken shame and embarrassment.

One day a new preacher came to this church. After worship he greeted the boy on the way out. He looked at him and asked, "Who is your father?" There was shocked silence. Then the preacher said, "No wait. I *know* your father. He is my father too! You are a child of God!" The email goes on to say that the one who told that story is now the Governor of Tennessee.

Like that preacher, Peter sees with the eyes of Jesus. He sees a human being not only paralyzed in body, but frozen in soul. Of the two being frozen of soul is by far the more disabling. There are millions of human beings who are free to move about the planet however and whenever they wish, but who are paralyzed to move beyond their feelings of helplessness and fear; who are imprisoned by anger, hurt, shame and guilt;

who are stuck in anxiety and isolation; who are paralyzed by grief and loneliness. We know these people. In many ways we are these people.

We live with a yearning that someone, Jesus for instance, will look into our eyes and *see us*. Yet at the very same time we are terrified of the very thing we desire. What if Jesus *sees us* and is horrified. We cannot bear the thought that he would look into our lives and see us as *we see ourselves*. How often do we distance ourselves from the eyes of love? How often do we shrink from the offer of friendship? How often would we rather work smashing rocks for a living to earn our worthiness than simply to receive acceptance and love as a free gift?

What happened on that day at the Temple gate? The scripture says that, in response to the words of Peter, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk," the man did just that. And here are the most amazing and important words, "*and he entered the temple with them.*" The word "entered" is important.

To cross the threshold of the gate and enter into the temple is no simple geographical move. It is profoundly spiritual. Yes we are here this morning in the church sanctuary. But in so many ways we experience ourselves as on the outside—at the gate, feeling on the outside. We hear the words, sing the hymns and say the prayers, listen to the music and we believe that there a spiritual reality promised that we are unable to experience for ourselves. The answer is not to believe *more*. The answer is to allow the eyes of Jesus to penetrate our guilt and shame, our fear and anger and to trust that he looks with eyes of love and yearning for us to be free. I believe that what allows the man

to rise is not so much a miraculous intervention, but the awakening of hope. I *can* get up! I *can* cross the threshold into the life of God! I am not paralyzed! There is more for me than this life that I settle for. It is *not* what it is!

Can you allow yourselves to be seen by Jesus with eyes of love and yearning for you to be free? Can you cross the threshold of the gate and into the interior of the life of God? Can you then dare to meet another human being where they are and offer them the same gift? Amen.