

Narrative Lectionary: Peter Heals in Jerusalem

April 26, 2020

I had just been called to serve as pastor in Eugene, and one of the first volunteers I met was Dave, a man in his mid-thirties who was walking with a cane. He'd served two years in the Peace Corps, and then I believe became a teacher. But now the onset of muscular sclerosis was taking its toll. Dave came into the church office to help with the bulletin. But then his condition worsened, and he couldn't come to the office or make it to worship anymore, and I began to visit him at home. He wasn't much older than I was.

Dave would say to me, Pastor John, I believe God allowed me to have this disease to get my attention. This disease was a tap on my shoulder. I wasn't as close to God as I should have been. Well, God's got my attention now. So why doesn't God heal me of this? I promise I'll live for him now. Will you pray that this illness would be healed? And I prayed as best as I could pray, laying hands on Dave, praying with as much faith as I had, but Dave was not healed of the illness, in fact, he continued to decline physically. Did I see God's work in his life in other ways? You bet I did. But he did not receive that physical healing that we prayed for.

We have a story today about the physical healing of a man lame from birth, and he didn't even ask for healing! But it brings up the discussion of prayer and healing and God's involvement in the world. This story from the Acts of the Apostles takes place after the Day of Pentecost, when the disciples are given the power of the Holy Spirit (we'll get to that story at the end of May). The disciples are given the power to do signs and wonders, just like Jesus did.

So one day the apostles Peter and John walk to the Jerusalem temple to pray at 3 in the afternoon. There were regular times to pray at the temple- 9 and 12 and 3, and these Jewish disciples were still following those traditions. They come upon a typical scene at the entrance to the temple. A group of disabled people are there begging. If you were a physically-challenged person, and you couldn't make a living, begging became your work; it was your Social Security. So family members or friends would bring disabled people to the temple so they could take advantage of the Jewish custom of almsgiving, and then they would come pick them up at night.

And maybe this beggar is having a pretty good day. People are being somewhat generous, and his friends can take him to the market that night to buy some food. At three o'clock, the apostles Peter and John walk by. Luke says, "When he saw Peter and John go into the temple, he asked them for alms."

Typically a beggar wouldn't look strangers in the eyes. There was to be no contact between those who were ill, because they were seen as unclean, and those who passed by. But for some reason he notices Peter and John. The Greek word for "saw", he *saw* Peter and John, has a sense of anticipation about it. He saw them in a way differently from the way he was seeing other passersby. Maybe there is something about the touch of Jesus in their faces.

And remember that they have spent three years following Jesus. They saw how he noticed those around him. When Jesus was eating at the home of a religious leader named Simon, and a woman walks in and anoints Jesus' feet, Simon is scandalized, and mutters, If Jesus knew anything about this woman, he wouldn't let her do this. And do you remember the question Jesus asks Simon? Simon, do you *see* this woman? Do you really see her as a fellow human being? Or is she just another statistic, another problem, another caricature of the kind of people you don't like.

So when the apostles walk near this man who is begging for alms because he is lame, Peter looks at him intently, and says, "Look at us." They really want to see him. Peter and John must have been remembering Jesus's ministry, because they really look at this man. Peter says, Let's be in relationship here. Let's take this deeper. God has placed us here in this moment. Notice they also give up what is next on their agenda, at least for the moment. They have come to pray, but now the Spirit is saying, Something else needs your attention right now. They give up their agenda to be with this man right here, right now. So the man thinks- Great! They are really paying attention. Maybe they'll be a little more generous than the usual passerby.

"But Peter says, 'I have no gold or silver, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong." Do you notice the phrase *raised him up* there? As Jesus was raised up from the dead, now

the disciples are looking to raise people up. Acts is the practical working out of the resurrection of Jesus. How does it look in the world? This is a sign of resurrection. They take this lame man by the hand and “raise him up.”

The man jumps up, and begins to walk, and then he is leaping and praising God. Notice this man doesn't even need rehab! And where does he walk? Into the temple to pray with Peter and John.

This might have been the first time in his life in the temple. In Jesus' day, people who had illnesses were thought to have committed some sin that God was punishing them for, so it might have been uncomfortable for the blind and lame and deaf to go into the temple. They would have thought, We are not welcome in the community.

But now this stigma has been removed, because of the resurrection power shown forth in Peter, and this man is welcomed into the community. He can walk and leap and praise God right there in the temple. He could now be right there in the presence of God with everybody else.

But let's talk about the need for healing in our lives. Do you notice that so many of the prayers that we pray on Sunday morning are for people with physical and mental problems? Cancer and heart disease and addiction and mental illness. And do we see what we would call answers to prayer in those people? Of course we do—and yes, God heals in so many ways. God uses the power of our own bodies and our minds. God uses medicine and surgery and talk therapy and physical therapy. We have seen people with deep pain and hurt able to figuratively get up and walk again because of God's healing. We have seen relationships restored because of God's healing. We have seen reconciliation of former enemies because of God's healing. Sometimes the answer to our prayers is that we are able to get through another day. Sometimes when healing comes, it comes slowly, and in stages, and we are refined in the process. Sometimes we see healing only in hindsight, and we realize God has been at work in ways we haven't been aware of. But God is always working for good (Romans 8:28). The apostles go out into the world and live as if there is resurrection power, and we pray and act believing in God's ability to bring new life today. God by the way, God brings healing to our society as well, through

our citizenship and our organizing and our actions. God wants to bring healing to the world.

Here's something else to take away from this story- this is a story of hospitality. Whenever healing happens in Scripture, hospitality happens as well. Jesus reaches out to those people who have been seen as ritually unclean, the lepers and the blind and deaf and lame. They were outsiders who could only live on the edge of community. So when Jesus heals somebody, or God heals somebody through the apostles, they are welcomed back into community.

In The Lutheran Magazine some years ago, I read about a church in Jamaica, New York that puts on their church sign greetings to people of other faith traditions when they are celebrating their holy-days. That is hospitality. They are inviting those people to jump up and praise the God they know and love. I believe hospitality is one of the centerpieces of following Jesus.

Peter says to the lame man, I don't have silver or gold, but I have this. What has God given us? We are blessed to be a blessing. I invite us this week, in the midst of this pandemic, to notice, like Peter did with the man lame from birth, to gaze intently, maybe if it is through Zoom, to find ways to raise people in the name of Jesus- send the gift, write the email or the letter, make the phone call, reach out to the lonely, teach the children, say thanks to the workers, believing in God's presence and power through it all. Amen.