

## The Threshold of Healing

Acts 3:1-10

*Third Sunday after Pentecost/ 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021*

He was there every day at the entrance to the temple. Lame from birth. Unable to move on his own. At the mercy of others who carried him daily to the gate. Like clockwork. Prayers were offered daily in the temple in Jerusalem, morning, afternoon, and evening. The afternoon crowd would be arriving soon. His friends carried and placed him next to the gate called Beautiful, a high-traffic location for the faithful making their way into the temple to pray. Also known as the Double Gate, it was ornate and, well, beautiful. Most people gained access to the Temple Mount through that gate, which led to a corridor that took you up to the temple. Most people...except if you were crippled, disabled, disfigured, lame, or maimed in any way. There was no access for you (see Lev. 21:16-23). You could only go so far. You could not go all the way in along with everyone else to pray. You had to remain outside. A long time. No access. Your entire life. The lame man at the Beautiful Gate was more than forty years old (Acts 4:23). It's a striking image...did anyone ever consider him "beautiful"? Did anyone ever really see him?

He was there because he was needy. He was poor. He could not work. He could not provide for himself. There was no safety net. He relied on the generosity of others. He's counting on their alms, their gifts, spare change thrown his way as the religious ones make their way to practice their piety and commune with God. Gifts of charity were encouraged. God rewards those who give to the poor; giving to the poor, doing "good deeds" was a way to gain favor from God (Prov. 19:17). The lame man is dependent upon, perhaps even taking advantage of, their piety; and those going into the temple, the pious, religious folks need him to be lame, stay lame, because they need someone to give alms to in order to make them feel good about themselves in the eyes of God.

But did anyone ever really see him? He was there every day. Maybe morning, afternoon, and evening. Surely, Peter and John must have noticed him before, he couldn't have been a stranger to them. Perhaps some days they even tossed some coins his way. Still, I wonder how many times had Peter and John walked right past him on the way to pray? What was it about that day, that moment, what was it about them on that day?

The lame man cried out, first. And then Luke tells us that Peter and John "looked intently at him..." (Acts 3:4). Not a passing glance, but a penetrating gaze. They fastened their eyes on the man, looked at him, earnestly, seeing him, really seeing him. What did Peter see? What went through Peter's thoughts? What went through his heart?

"Look at us," Peter said. It's an odd request. The man "fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them" (Acts 3:5). Expecting some money, an offering, a donation, alms, anything for the poor. What more could he expect from them? Not much. Maybe they would be extra-generous, extra-pious, giving enough to get him through several days instead of one. The thought of healing...that was out of the question, not even on the horizon.

Looking at him intently, Peter says, “Silver or gold have I none, but what I have I give you, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk” (Acts 3:6). And then Peter “took him by the right hand, and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong, jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and”—look what happened next—“he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God” (Acts 3:7-8). The outsider entered into the courts of the Lord—for the first time in his life.

There are, of course, several things about this story that might give us pause. Such as the way various religions deal with impurity, the sick, the “unclean,” the wounded, the marginalized. Shunning, shame, and exclusion abound. Judaism in Jesus’ day wasn’t unique in this respect. And there’s the miraculous healing, which, as we know, doesn’t happen every day. Yes, sometimes, but not on a regular basis. Healing stories in the Bible, including exorcisms, are really about power, who has power and who doesn’t have it. Maybe it’s easy for the cynic in us to discount this story, pass right over it, assuming that it has nothing to say to us today. Despite these limitations, this is still a text for the church, written *for* the church, *to* the church, *this* church, today.

“And Peter looked at him intently. . . .” This fact should not be overlooked because at the heart of the story, the precondition for the healing to take place is the meeting, actually seeing the suffering of God’s people. In fact, we see that the way to prayer—prayer as meeting with God—the place of meeting is entered through the gate of human suffering. We can’t go to the temple, go to church, without seeing who is outside the temple.

Theologian Willie James Jennings says it beautifully, “At the doorway to worship are those whose very presence should discipline praise and guide hope. Before praises go up to God the poor and lame, sick and pained must be seen. This lame man lay in the path toward praise which is also the path of the disciples. The route was established by Jesus. This man is precisely the person Jesus will see and demands his disciples see. Peter and John find themselves without an option: time to see with the eyes of Jesus.”<sup>1</sup>

“Silver and gold have I none, but in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” *Jesus Christ*. The name is not a talisman. It isn’t magical. But the name does involve power. It’s not the name alone, but what his name means and then what his life embodies that has power; not just the name, but the person, the person connected to the name. Jesus. *Yeshua*. Meaning, Yahweh saves. Yahweh heals. Yahweh makes well. Christ. *Christos*. Anointed. The anointed of God who saves, who heals, who by his stripes, his bruises, his wounds—somehow, some way—we are healed, made whole (Is. 53:5). Peter and John witnessed his life, experienced his life, his compassion, his suffering, they witnessed his stripes, his wounds, this wounded healer.<sup>2</sup> And somehow, some way—I don’t fully understand it but know that it’s true—he continues to meet us in our wounds. Christ meets us in our woundedness. Our wound is the place of connection, the place of meeting. We could say, then, that our wounds are, therefore, holy, not unlike the temple. It’s in our wounds, the hurting broken places in our lives, that we encounter and experience God’s deep love and compassion and peace and grace.

Christ is the wounded healer. The Messiah is the one who heals, restores, and gives life. And by virtue of the Holy Spirit at work in us, Christ the wounded healer is present and at work

in us. Because we know he has and is and will meet us in our wounds with his healing presence, we're given new eyes that are attentive to the wounds of others, the people we ordinarily ignore or have no compassion toward, maybe even people we pass by or leave behind on the way to church. That's why I can't help but think that something of Peter and John's experience with the suffering Christ had conditioned them to see the lame man that day, maybe for the first time, to see everything, especially the places of deepest pain and want and need, with new eyes. Consider all that they saw in Jesus, this suffering servant of God, conscious of who they are now because of their experience with him, wounded by grace; consider the changed people they had become as witnesses to resurrection, and how they see themselves because of what he showed them and suffered, all this now informs how they look out upon the world.

And if there's something of the wounded healer at work in you and me, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, that means there's something of the wounded healer at work in all of us in the church—when we are truly being the church. Which means then at in many respects we can be “healers” in the name of the wounded healer. The Christian life then becomes a life where we meet the Risen Christ in broken and wounded places and people. Because we have a special sensitivity to human suffering we can see it, and recognize it, look at it intently when others might be tempted to look away. And then conscious of the wounded healer's power in us, because he is with us in the broken places, because we have met him in our own brokenness, we are then free to minister to those at the thresholds who feel “outside,” cut off from grace, without access to the joy of the Lord.

Whether or not we have silver or gold—and we and this congregation are blessed with both—we are servants of the Risen Christ and in his name, we can engage in ministry that seeks to comfort, heal, restore, and make well. The church is an agent of healing. And we don't have to look very far to see this. Look at the work of the Deacons; we see, we have felt their ministry of love and compassion. There are so many places I can point to, both here and around the world, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Our own exploration of Stephen Ministry has the capacity of deepening our witness—in this community but also to one another.

And the need for healing, wholeness, and wellness will only become greater as we emerge from this pandemic. Delayed grief from the past year is starting to emerge, including here in this congregation. We've all been through some form of trauma this year, whether it's trauma with a capital “T” or small “t”, whether directly or indirectly, it's still trauma. Our awareness of this will only become stronger as we finally take off our masks and [allow ourselves to exhale](#) and look back upon what we've just experienced together in a nation that where 600,000 people have died, and then add and multiply the number of people directly impacted by each loss.<sup>3</sup> It's almost too much to take in. That's why it's really important to be compassionate toward ourselves and one another. Mental health issues are increasing at a dramatic rate throughout the United States and it's actually difficult to find a therapist or counselor, especially a therapist or counselor that takes your insurance; some have waitlists. This is a pastoral, a theological, an ecclesial issue for us—how can we offer healing to the “lame” right outside the doors of the church, even inside the doors of the church? Rachel Held Evans speaks for many when she said, “I believe the church is called to the slow and difficult work of healing. We are called to enter into one another's pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome.”<sup>4</sup>

And I believe that we can enter one another's pain when we acknowledge our own personal need for healing, acknowledge our wounds—for me to see that I, too, am lame crying

out for alms. We each in our own way are lame and need to be seen, we are in need of comfort and healing. And as you all know, allowing yourself to be seen comes with enormous risk. Healing comes with enormous risk. Sometimes the church really doesn't want to see healing. Sometimes the church doesn't know what to do when God shows up and actually starts healing, whatever healing looks like. Just to continue to read through Acts 3 and Acts 4 and you see that all of this comes with enormous risk. Nevertheless, we in the church can risk being vulnerable to one another. And we can draw strength and support for one another as we care for and love one another. Being honest about our wounds and caring for one another as wounded-healers is transformative. In fact—and I'm a little reluctant to say this—in fact our wounds can be a source of enormous strength and power and grace. Perhaps not every wound, to be sure, but many. At least I have found this to be true in my own life. Our wounds can be the source of strength and power and grace. What if God enters our lives through our wounds and through us out into the world with grace?

In Thornton Wilder's (1897-1964) play "The Angel That Troubled the Waters," inspired by the story of the healing pools of Bethesda in John's Gospel (5:2-8), we are brought into a shadowy, gray cave where the "blind and malformed" seek cures in a healing pool. Then a physician arrives one day, a physician—a physician—hopes to be cured of his melancholy. The pain in his heart is too much for him. He wants to be free of it, cleansed, healed by the holy waters. But the angel responds, "Stand back—this is not for you." Indignant, the physician ignores the angel and presses forward toward the pool, he pleads to go down into the healing waters. But the angel insists: "Without your wounds where would your power be? The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken in the wheels of living. In love's service, only the wounded can serve."<sup>5</sup>

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*Masolino da Panicale (c.1383-c.1447) & Massaccio (1409-1428) Peter and John Healing the Lame Man, c.1427, Fresco, The Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence, Italy*

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<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 41.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of the “wounded healer” was first identified and developed by C. G. Jung (1875-1961). “Only the wounded physician heals,” Jung said. See C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 134. See also his “Fundamental Questions of Psychotherapy,” *Collected Works 16 -The Practice of Psychotherapy: Essays on the Psychology of the Transference and Other Subjects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 116. Jung understood Christ as manifesting the archetype of the wounded healer. The idea of the “wounded physician” has its origins in the Greek myth of Asklepios (Asclepius), the Greek god of medicine. Henri Nouwen developed this idea for pastoral ministry in *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (Image Books, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Ed Young, “[What Happens When Americans Can Finally Exhale](#),” *The Atlantic*, May 20, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Thornton Wilder, *Collected Short Plays Thornton Wilder -Volume II*, (Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 71.