

## The Church of the Left Out\*

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Acts 3:1-10                      Lesley Morrison

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 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 astonishment at what had happened to him.

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Peter and John look intently at this man. (In other translations) they look straight at him; they fasten their gaze upon him.

And they do not only look at him - they ask him to look at them. In other words they make eye contact with him. They spend time with him. They see an actual human being in front of them.

We can speculate about why the man is at the gate every day, and never inside the Temple. It may be he has never asked to enter. It may be that, with his disability, the steps at the gate seem impossible to climb. It may be that his people never imagined he'd want to go inside and participate in the prayers and worship, that they make an assumption based on his disability. There is one verse in the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 21:18-21) that says people with disabilities could not enter the Temple but we've learned not to take one verse and extrapolate an judgment of all ancient Jewish attitudes and practices. In any case, this man was carried to the Beautiful Gate every day, to sit in that place, begging for money.

When you drive to Alewife, there are people on the center islands every day, begging for money. When you exit the Pike in Cambridge, there are people there on the side of the road every day, begging for money. When you visit Copley Square in Boston, there are people there at the exit to the train, every day, begging for money. And if you pass them every day, you probably don't make eye contact, and you probably don't know their name. Peter and John make eye contact with this man.

Sometimes the Bible frustrates me - we hear a story about someone being offered dignity and respect - being truly seen - being restored to some aspect of life that they had previously lost - and the Bible doesn't give us their name. A few weeks ago, we heard Mark's story of the woman who anointed Jesus, and Jesus' statement that she would be remembered - but Mark did not record her name. In this story, a man who was ignored by passersby except for the millisecond when they tossed coins in his bucket is restored to fullness of life. This man is seen by Peter and John but we are not told his name. I wish that this text would make it plain - that Peter and John encountered a man with a disability, someone on the margins of his community, and they chose to stop in their tracks, make eye contact with him, and treat him as a person of inherent worth and dignity, equal in worth to every other person. That Peter and John saw in this man the *Imago Dei* - the image of God - because as followers of Jesus they looked for the *Imago Dei* in every person they encountered. That's the norm their beloved teacher taught them, the norm we find in Matthew 25, and in loads of other passages. But it would be nice if the Bible gave us his name.

Peter says, to this man whose name we do not know, who seems only to expect a few coins, Peter says "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."

I have no silver or gold but what I have, I give you.

Peter and John, as part of the early church, share goods in common with their community - and as followers of an itinerant

carpenter they were never going to have a lot of money. But what they have - the name of Jesus Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, their commitment to loving their neighbors, their commitment to the dignity of all people - this, they give to the man.

And what do they give? We can read this healing story literally: that in an instant this man's inability to stand or walk is cured. But that may not be the most helpful reading. Can we complexify? Amos Yong, author of *The Bible, Disability and the Church*, names the complexity:

“Disability is to be understood not only in biological or medical terms, but also in social terms. In other words, people with disabilities are not only individuals who have physical or mental/intellectual challenges; they are people who confront challenges made worse by the attendant social stigmas and attitudes which subjugate them. Hence, people with disabilities not only suffer physically (although some really may not suffer in this sense at all, but non-disabled people impute suffering to them based on normative assumptions), but also are afflicted by the social prejudices that they have to deal with every day. Indeed, the tragedy and evils of disability have less to do with the biomedical conditions of human bodies than with the social repercussions of an ableist and normative bias.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, without quoting Yong's entire book - I do recommend that you read it - let me jump to Yong's interpretation of this healing story. In his reflection, the healing of the man at the Beautiful

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<sup>1</sup> Amos Yong. *The Bible, Disability and the Church: A New Vision for the People of God*. Kindle Edition.

Gate is more about restoring him to full inclusion in the community, and full opportunity to worship God.

And Yong makes another crucial point: “the redemption of disability doesn't necessarily consist in the healing of disabilities but involves the removal of those barriers - social, structural, economic, political, and religious/theological - which hinder those people with temporarily able bodies from welcoming and being hospitable to people with disabilities!”<sup>2</sup> Did you catch that? Part of this healing story is the removal of barriers that keep temporarily abled people from welcoming people with disabilities.

To give you one more quote from Amos Yong, “I refute the normative notion that only non-disabled bodies are sufficiently holy and pure to accomplish the work of God.”<sup>3</sup>

I wish we knew the name of the man sitting at the Beautiful Gate. But we don't. And I wish we could hear his voice - but at least we can glimpse his perspective. We glimpse his choices and priorities in the moments after whatever it is that Peter and John do.

“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

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<sup>2</sup> Amos Yong. *The Bible, Disability and the Church: A New Vision for the People of God*. Kindle Edition.

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Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with wonder and astonishment at what had happened to him.”

He jumps up and goes right into the temple, leaping and praising God. The first thing he does is to go into the temple for prayer and praise.

He may not have silver and gold, either - but what he has, he offers to God.

But there is something else I want us to catch in our text this morning. In the moment of healing Peter and John - who have already made eye contact with this man - reach out to him and take him by the right hand. This is one of those phrases that some of us would miss. But if you've been in the Congregational Church in New England for a long time, you might have been offered the Right Hand of Fellowship. This is one of the ways we've welcomed people into local church membership, and we can trace it all the way back to John and Peter and James offering Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when Paul became a leader of the early church.<sup>4</sup>

Is it possible that a major part of this moment of healing is not a cure - it's offering this man an invitation into full fellowship and participation in the life of the community?

I want to note one more thing in the text. When the man, leaping joyfully and praising God, enters the temple, people recognize him. “recognize[d] him as the one who used to sit and ask for

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<sup>4</sup> Galatians 2:9

alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they [are] filled with wonder and astonishment at what had happened to him.”

Peter and John reached out to him with the right hand of fellowship, and offered both healing and welcome. If his legs worked differently, that was no more wondrous than being welcomed.

In the words of the World Council of Churches, ““Healing” refers to wounds that are incurred by the violence of excluding people by sending them away....“healing” is needed when despised members have been cut off from the body of Christ. ...To be healed is to be restored in a relationship of communion with God and one another.”<sup>5</sup>

I wish we knew the man’s name. I wish we heard his interpretation of this moment.

But then again, perhaps because we don’t know his name, we’re invited to imagine ourselves in his place. Whatever has held us outside the gate of God’s house - physical or intellectual ability, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, trauma, worry, whatever...may we hear in this man’s story a messenger of God reaching out to our right hand.

And we know what this man did in response. He jumped and leaped and ran into the temple and worshipped God. May each

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/GEN-PRO-06-Gift-of-Being\\_ADOPTED.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/GEN-PRO-06-Gift-of-Being_ADOPTED.pdf)

of us be so touched by God's love and welcome that we are able to do the same. Amen.

\* Title is taken from a sermon title by Rev. Marja Coons-Torn