

1st Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Acts 2:37-3:16

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.' And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. 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. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 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.' And he 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 he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, 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.

While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, 'You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

If you are so inclined, I invite you to open up your pew bible to the very first page of the Book of Acts. You'll find it right in between the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Romans. Go ahead and take a minute. Once you have found it, you will notice that the very top of the page is titled "The Acts of the Apostles." Unfortunately, I have some bad news for you: that title is *wrong!* It is a very inaccurate title for

this book of the bible. You see, sometimes we forget that the titles of the books of the bible, by and large, were later additions that were added centuries after they themselves were written. Even if the Book of Acts was named at the time of its composition, in my opinion, it would be highly unlikely that it would be called the "Acts of the Apostles." And here's my reasoning.

To name the Book of Acts the Acts "of the Apostles" suggests that the Apostles themselves are the main characters of the story. However, if you read this book in its entirety, you might note that the book is much less about them and more about what they do. In fact, it would be even *more* accurate to say that this book is less about them and more about *who it is* that empowers them to do what they are doing.

Therefore, I propose a new title to this book. Instead of calling it the Acts of the Apostles, for the remainder of this sermon series, we will refer to this book as the Acts of the *Holy Spirit*. That is what, or more accurately, *who* this book is *really* about. In fact, for those of you who are brave enough, I, your pastor, am giving you permission to take your pencil and to *cross out* the word "Apostles" in the title of this book in your pew bible and write next to it "Holy Spirit." There will be extra points handed out to any congregant that comes up to me after the service and proves to me that they did so!

Last week, we celebrated Pentecost and the Holy Spirit coming upon that large group of followers in that upper room. One thing that we will notice as we continue our journey through the Acts of the Holy Spirit over the next month is that the Holy Spirit tends to move the followers in ever-growing concentric circles. At the end of the Gospels, Jesus tells his disciples that they are being commissioned to go spread the message "from Judea, then Samaria, and the ends of the earth." Already, in the first few chapters of this book, we see this promise being fulfilled on a local scale before going global.

The Pentecost event took place in "an upper room." A room, by definition, has walls - it has an inside and then there is an outside. But the Holy Spirit did not keep the followers inside for long; they were not long to keep their light hidden under a bushel! We remembered last week that a crowd was drawn together because of that loud commotion, and Peter and the disciples went out into the courtyard to address the cynics. After giving what can be considered the first ever post-Ascension sermon, Peter and his colleagues credit the Holy Spirit with adding 3,000 converts to the Way! Friends, up until a few weeks ago, that number is probably larger than the number of people that call this island home!

But what is perhaps more remarkable than the amount of people who were converted after hearing the testimony of one follower is who exactly that follower was. That first sermon, that first testimony, was given by Peter, a man who - just a few weeks prior - had *really* screwed up. Peter had denied Jesus not once, not twice, but *three* times in that darkest of hours. When you think of it, it was only a few weeks ago when you and I gathered on that Good Friday evening to sit with Peter, warming our hands by that charcoal fire, watching the shadows dance across the worried face of that traitorous Peter!

And then, as the story goes, he went fishing with some of his friends (they weren't having a lot of luck) and then this mysterious stranger pops up at beach. Peter recognizes his Lord and Savior and, forgetting perhaps for a moment that he had so recently betrayed him, he jumps into the water and swims ashore where Jesus is waiting for him and Jesus tells him that he still has a use for Peter. Jesus tells Peter that even these most egregious acts of betrayal could do nothing to keep Peter from the work that he was being called to do.

And now, we see Peter investing the fruits of his redemption and being used through the power of the Holy Spirit. So the next time you feel inadequate, the next time you feel that you've just sinned so much that God couldn't possibly have any use for the likes of *you*, remember a person by the name of

Peter. Remember these stories that we are going to be telling about how the Holy Spirit used all of these sinful, broken men, women, and children to do incredible things! Remember that this book, at the very least, reminds us that no sin is so great as to keep us from doing that which God has called us to do!

You see, we lift up others because God first lifted us up. Peter's redemption is what makes possible the miracle that comes in today's story in chapter three of the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

So far, the Gospel has been spread in and with large groups of people. At first, a very crowded upper room, and then a crowded courtyard, and then a large area where thousands of people were converted. However, today's passage reminds us that the work of the Holy Spirit is not to be limited to large crowds; the fruits of the Spirit are also to be found in intimate encounters with people who society tends to ignore.

Peter and John are walking up to the Temple at the hour of prayer and pass a man who had been lame from birth. Every day, the text tells us, companions of his carried his limp body and placed him before what is - perhaps ironically - called the "Beautiful Gate." There he sits all day long, begging and hoping for a few scraps of food or a penny here and there.

Now I recently spent several days in Rome and there a large part of their tourism industry revolves around the countless beautiful and historic churches. After a few days in Rome, you begin to feel as though you've seen so many churches that they all start to blend together as you are overwhelmed from the sheer amount of beauty. However, one thing that I do remember upon entering every church is that you would always walk next to at least one beggar hoping to receive the mercy of travelers. Now I, like most people, tended to act in one of two ways: either I would walk past them and ignore them or I would drop a euro or a half-euro in their cup. The latter action was usually done to temporarily appease my sense of guilt instead of an actual concern for the wellbeing of the person.

However, when Peter and John walk by and encounter this crippled man by the Beautiful Gate, they do neither. Instead of giving him money or walking right past him, they stop. And then they actually look at him. In fact, the text tells us that Peter looked *intently* at him, as did John. The man looks at them and expects to receive a dollar or two as most people tend to do. But Peter and John tell him that they have no money to give. But they will nevertheless give the man everything they have on them which, in that moment, is nothing less than the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter touches the lame man, grabs him and raises him up and immediately, we are told, his feet and ankles were made strong.

And then, quite the scene erupts! The man leaves the beautiful gate and jumps up and down! He gets up and walks and enters the temple with Peter and John, walking and leaping and praising God. And people begin to notice. Everyone turns their head and they recognize him as the one "who used to sit" and beg by the "Beautiful Gate." All are filled with wonder and amazement. As Peter then addresses the crowd and uses this moment to interpret and preach, he makes it very clear that it was not them that healed this man but rather the strong name of Jesus Christ invoked by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, you may have noticed that our first reading today was from the Gospel of Mark. It was the story of Blind Bartimaeus or, perhaps more accurately, "now-not-so-blind Bartimaeus." I chose this passage today for two reasons. Firstly, the story of the healing of Blind Bartimaeus bears striking resemblance to today's story. The similarity between the two miracles reminds us that we are doing no less than the very work that Christ did in the Gospels!

Secondly, the very first step in both of these miracles was not just acknowledging but *truly seeing* the person who needed to be lifted. The very first step in doing the work of the Holy Spirit was not a

committee meeting. The very first step in doing the work of the Holy Spirit was not an up-to-date website or a young pastor or a pretty church building or a vibrant children and youth program. The very first step in doing the work of the Holy Spirit, in both of today's stories, was simply seeing another person for who they are and not as the label that society had slapped on them.

Everyone was telling Jesus to ignore this pestering blind dude. Everyone was shouting at Bartimaeus to shut up and leave Jesus alone. But Jesus stopped and called him close. Jesus saw someone who needed help and *not* an annoying beggar.

Likewise, Peter and John were probably two of thousands of people who had walked by the lame man by the Beautiful Gate - the rest of which probably idly tossed in a coin or two or simply walked by. Peter and John, however, stopped and "fixed their attention on him."

Friends, the most important thing - and perhaps also the hardest thing - that the Holy Spirit calls us to do is to truly see one another as humans. And it is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can truly see the humanity in one another.

Sometimes, the biggest miracles happen when someone is simply seen for who they are.

Sometimes, the biggest atrocities happen when someone is seen as what others want them to be.

Call it stereotyping. Call it profiling. Call it labeling. You can call it whatever you want but most of us have a tendency of doing it. We dismiss the beggar as a freeloader. We think of the hispanic as a stupid because they don't speak English. We roll our eyes at the summer visitors because we see them as the "invasion of the Hamptonites." But if we look intently, if we take the time to see others as they really are, what might we find? We might find that that beggar is actually a homeless veteran. We might find that the hispanic gardener is a hard working father who is trying to raise his family with better opportunities than he had growing up. We might find that the millionaire driving the Bentley is actually spending his first summer without his wife who recently died of cancer.

One thing is for sure, looking intently at one another and seeing each other as the beloved, vulnerable children of God that we are takes intimacy and trust. It also takes sharing with one another our hopes, our fears, our dreams, and our insecurities. It takes trust that the information we share with one another will not be exploited, will not be used for fodder for the grapevine, but will be respected and heard and valued.

And when we do lift one another up, when we find someone needing help at the Beautiful Gate, it *will* make a scene. There will be jumping, and rejoicing, and praising! Make no mistake about it - all it takes is *one* person being lifted up by the power of the Holy Spirit to set into motion things that we could never predict.

I have a feeling that there are a couple "Beautiful Gates" around here on Shelter Island. I know for certain that there are people around this Island that are waiting to be seen and listened to. Will we look intently?

Come, Holy Spirit.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.