responding: meeting the needs of others

SCRIPTURE: ACTS 3:1-10  Dr. Richard Thompson
Description

The journey of following Christ involves meeting the physical needs of those in our community so that they might see the deep love that God has for them in Jesus Christ. In response to Easter, Peter now does the very works that Jesus did. He meets people on the way, listens to their need, meets that need and then tells others that they too can have life in Jesus’ name. Peter does not take weeks to figure out what God wants for him to do, he just jumps in as the Holy Spirit directs him. As you prepare this sermon, pray that the Holy Spirit would direct each person in your congregation into ministries of compassion this next week.

Scripture

Acts 3:1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. 2 Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. 4 Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” 5 So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. 6 Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” 7 Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. 8 He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. 9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.
I had a dream.

It came right after I took a new job as the assistant pastor at a large church next to downtown San Diego. My charge was to oversee all the children, youth and adult education ministries. I felt excited and nervous at the same time. So I moved our newly expanded little family—our daughter was a month old—to San Diego, and I got to work.

The only trouble was, within a month of my arrival, everybody on the support staff who worked in children and youth ministries quit! And I hadn’t even figured out where the bathrooms were yet...

Then I had a dream. I was in a smoke filled room where several large men in three-piece suits stood together laughing and smoking cigars, and then one of them would come over to where I was standing and slap me on the back as if to congratulate me. But all the while I remember this nagging sense that I was being had. Then one of these men said to me, “Your job is to raise $100,000. But you have to raise it in quarters.”

In my dream I reached into my pocket and pulled out some change, and counting the coins in my palm I said to the man, “Well, I have two quarters here.”

And that’s how the dream ended. Isn’t it amazing how the sub-conscious mind can sum up so clearly what it is we’re feeling, and fearing? That was a dream about the fear of not having enough to do the job. It was a dream about the fear of inadequacy. That I would not have what it would take.

When we are faced with a daunting need, or challenges to our faith, it seems almost inevitable that we find ourselves asking, “What can I do?” Then the reason why we can’t do something is because we believe we just don’t have it.

And “it” can be just about anything: training, the right words, money, time, talent, good looks, personality, the fact that “I’m a sinner,” that something ought to be left to the “professionals” (like the dinner table prayer at Thanksgiving—you know who always gets asked, but really, I’m glad to do it!)
We can tend to get focused on what we don’t have, but that can lead to paralysis, and dependence, and ultimately to a perception of scarcity. And when that happens we have to spend more and more time lowering expectations because high expectations make us nervous. We end up seeing the world as zero-sum situation.

That’s one way to go through life. But there is another way.

And that is to take stock of what we do have.

I love the story of Apollo 13. The astronauts had encountered a major disaster on board the space craft and radioed “Houston, we have a problem.” In the near panic of what to do in response, the flight controller shouted to everyone in the room, “People, don’t tell me what’s wrong, tell me what’s working!” In effect he was saying, “It won't do us any good to spend precious time talking about what we don’t have. Tell me what we do have!” Then everyone went to work to solve the problem.

We’ve seen Peter move from being a reluctant fisherman who followed Christ to an outspoken disciple. Peter, like us, still had to make a decision each day whether to focus on what he didn’t have, or on what he did have, one day soon after Pentecost. In his case I don’t think it was a difficult decision. Here’s what happened:

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There are many churches around the country that have placed a sign over the back door of the sanctuary that people can read on their way out on Sundays. It reads, “AS WORSHIP ENDS, LET MINISTRY BEGIN!” This is exactly what Peter and John were doing. They had stepped out from the intensity of the newly formed Christian movement described in Acts 2. Now they were out on the streets of the city and headed toward the Temple a little before three o’clock in the afternoon.

And just before they came through the gate, they were confronted with a very tough situation. A man crippled from birth sat on the side of the road. Based on what Luke tells us, it seems the problem centered in his feet. There may have been some paralysis, and the bones were out of place so that he was not able to walk.
We’ve all had experiences of encounters with those asking for help who are very clearly physically disabled in some way. We’ve all seen the cardboard signs, or had the Styrofoam cup thrust in front of us as we walk into or out of a building. We all feel it. Guilt. Compassion. Helplessness. Maybe even anger over the strong suspicion that we’re being manipulated. We feel confused over how to respond too. If we give them what they want, won’t they just spend it on booze and cigarettes?

The crippled man Peter and John encountered that afternoon was a fixture at that gate. He was there every day, and quite frankly he was probably pretty good at asking for money. He had it down how to look and sound. Really, who can blame him? It was how it worked if you were disabled. This was the informal version of what we call social security today. At least there were some folks good enough to every day carry him to this same spot in front of a major entrance to the Temple so that he could ask for alms.

I mean what else did anyone have a right to expect? Don’t misunderstand me, it’s important to have some kind of “system.” Welfare, for all our criticism of it because of how it is used and abused, at the end of the day, is still very much needed. It’s just that our Lord doesn’t want to leave it there. Then or now.

Because we have so much more to give than we may realize.

The lame man saw Peter and John coming. I think he saw two more good prospects. He probably recognized them as regulars at the Temple. So he stretched out his hand, and called to them, asking for money. Exactly what anyone might expect. It was the drill. And everybody knew their part.

But then things got interesting. Look at verses 4 and 5 and all these references to eye contact:

“Peter and John looked intently at him.”

Peter tells the lame man, “Look at us!”

The lame man “fixed his attention on them...”

wait. receive. respond.
I suspect, according to the daily drill, that there would normally be minimal eye contact. Just pass on by and plop some coins in the hat almost like tossing money into the basket as you slow down to pay at the toll booth. But these verses say Peter and John really looked at this man. They thought about him. And in turn, they told this man to take a good look at them as well.

We've all had the unusual experience of someone asking, “So tell me, how are you?” and then look us right in the eye, and wait for our response. It can be a little disconcerting. We don't expect someone to care that much!

So Peter and John insist on eye contact not in order to confront this man, but in order to connect with him. Based on what Luke tells us, I’m sure this insistence on direct face-to-face conversation also raised this lame man’s expectations. Maybe finally these two men were going to come through BIG TIME. Here comes a large donation that will really help him to get ahead.

And this is where Peter took stock of what he had to give. Peter’s first word no doubt brought this man’s thoughts crashing back to earth. “I don’t have any money...”

There’s been some discussion about why Peter and John said this. One theory is that they were standing next to the Nicanor Gate outside the Temple. It was huge, and covered in Corinthian bronze that shone like gold. Perhaps the lame man had grown to depend on help coming from sitting in this same place for the rest of his life. Another very possible explanation is quite simply that Peter and John had given everything to the church! It’s always been that way; the Christian movement from the outset has always relied on the sacrificial giving of its members. The last theory also has to be true; Peter and John tell this man they have no money in order to create in him a new expectation. Because what Peter is about to say will change this man’s life in every way, forever:

“"I don’t have any money, but what I do have I give to you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!”

wait. receive. respond.
There are three crucial questions we must ask:

What does Peter “have”?

Do we have what Peter has?

And if we have what Peter has, then what does this mean for us, and what we have to give?

Peter says, “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” What Peter has is faith, confidence, and trust, in Jesus.

But is that enough?

**Preacher’s Note:** Consider sharing a story in which a Christian organization was not meeting the real needs of those in their care.

I have a friend who just recently went to work for a man who is supposedly doing a wonderful outreach project for children and their families. But soon after taking the job our friend has noticed some huge needs in the organization. When she approached the man about her observations his repeated response has been, “Don’t worry about it, you’ve just got to have faith.” In the meantime some very real needs are not being addressed. That’s not it! That kind of “faith” is really an excuse to avoid dealing with real need. That man needs to go back and listen to James who teaches about a faith that works!

Peter is zeroed in on the need. But it’s clear that what Peter has is not something innate or natural to Peter. On his own he doesn’t have what it takes. He acts “in the name of Jesus Christ.” What Peter has is “position” under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In other words, he has “authorization.”
It’s like when Colin Powell was Secretary of State under George Bush, Jr. He could go to another country and deal, make offers, and respond to need because he was authorized to do so. Now Colin Powell is a nice looking man. He’s also a smart man. He’s had years of experience. But none of these things are enough to address the huge needs he encountered in his travels. What he needed and what he had was “authorization.” He knew the United States. He knew its policies. He had a personal relationship with the Commander in Chief. He knew his heart, and has the sense of our national leadership. And he had been appointed to go and given what he had been empowered to give.

Peter has this kind of relationship with Jesus. He knows his heart. He knows what Jesus stood for. And so do you.

Here’s where I need to say a word about Jesus and healing. This encounter in Acts 3 is very similar to the many healings that took place at the hand of Jesus in the gospels. In Luke’s gospel I found eleven accounts of people being made well, from lepers, the crippled and paralyzed, the “possessed,” to the deceased being brought back to life. In every case the healing made a point. It conveyed a message that God is really here, that we are loved, that we are restored to God, and to each other, and even to ourselves.

Think of just one example. When the four friends lower the paralyzed man down through the roof in front of Jesus, what does Jesus say? He says, “Your sins are forgiven.” The problem was the issue of authority. Only God has the power to forgive sins. It was then that Jesus said, “So you know I have this power, rise up and walk!” The healing was a demonstration of God’s authority resting on Jesus.

Now Jesus did not heal everyone in Palestine. That was not his point. There came a time when Lazarus died. All his work of healing drew the recipient back to God. Our Lord’s hearts beat for people’s souls, and their accepting the gift of God’s promise.

The words “salvation” and “healing” come from the same Greek root. Healing in Scripture is never just about the body, or relief from illness, or pain. It is always about re-connecting with God. It is “holistic.” Healing is of mind, body and soul. The words healing and salvation mean “wholeness,” forever!
Peter has learned this. He has faith in Jesus. He gets his mission. Therefore he has authorization.

But do we have what Peter has? My answer to that question is “I hope so!” But is it enough?

Listen to me, yes it is!

“But the needs are so huge. There are so many who are sick. So many who are broken. They’re all around us. They’re in our families just as much as they are in this crazy, chaotic world.”

Again, this is not about anything you and I carry around inside of us. This is not about any power you and I have. There is no little ritual to perform, or perfect word to say, or Tarot cards to turn. That’s called magical thinking. This is not about us. You and I cannot produce faith. That too is a gift from God by his Spirit.

That’s the point of Pentecost. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is loose in the world.

What you and I have is mercy, and grace, and promise. We have the name of Jesus Christ. We have authorization!

This leads to that last and most crucial question: If we have what Peter has, then what does this mean? What do we have to give?

Some research was done recently that takes stock of what has been accomplished because the followers of Jesus Christ have given what they have. Here are just a few examples:

Christianity ended the practice of infant exposure, gladiator contests, and cannibalism.

The institution of slavery came to an end in the West as a direct result of the implications of the gospel that every single human being has been created in the image of God.

Hospitals for the public were introduced by Christians in the fourth century.

wait. receive. respond.
The International Red Cross was founded in the nineteenth century by a Swiss evangelical Christian.

The Christian movement is fanned out across the world today working in schools, orphanages, and places of worship, using the skills of doctors, teachers, farmers, preachers, and business people.

Here’s the point. We must not underestimate what we have to give. Bruce Larson once said “When the church is busy being the church, people get well.” We must be careful not to underestimate the power of prayer for healing. There’s even scientific research being done on the mystery of the power of prayer.

PREACHER’S NOTE: CONSIDER SHARING STORY FROM A WAITING FOR WATER SMALL GROUP THAT HAS SERVED OTHERS IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY.

So all we can do is what Peter and John did. Pray and work in the name of Jesus Christ. Pray and work with our Lord’s mind in our own minds. This takes discernment. Sometimes it’s time to ask, seek, and knock and pray for direct healing. Sometimes it’s time to pray for peace and acceptance. In every case we give what we have.

The lame man leapt to his feet and jumped around like a kid with new basketball shoes. He created a commotion in the Temple and upset the batten-down-already-decided-how-life-should-be world. His healing was yet another sign that that you and I have been given more than we sometimes imagine.

And that you and I have a lot to give, more than we sometimes believe is possible.

Shall we pray...

wait. receive. respond.