

Peter and John were going up to the temple at three o'clock in the afternoon, the established prayer time. 2 Meanwhile, a man crippled since birth was being carried in. Every day, people would place him at the temple gate known as the Beautiful Gate so he could ask for money from those entering the temple. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he began to ask them for a gift. 4 Peter and John stared at him. Peter said, "Look at us!" 5 So the man gazed at them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 Peter said, "I don't have any money, but I will give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, rise up and walk!" 7 Then he grasped the man's right hand and raised him up. At once his feet and ankles became strong. 8 Jumping up, he began to walk around. He entered the temple with them, walking, leaping, and praising God. 9 All the people saw him walking and praising God. 10 They recognized him as the same one who used to sit at the temple's Beautiful Gate asking for money. They were filled with amazement and surprise at what had happened to him. (*Common English Bible*)

My childhood memories are spotty, but one memory is strong and mostly clear. Our church musician was living with us for awhile, in an attic bedroom that later became my own room. I always appreciated Fred, but there was one day when I was super sad about something. I was seated on the stairs to the second floor, hunched over, crying about it. And I remember Fred getting down to eye level with me and telling me that if I ever needed to talk with him, I could, that he was there for me. I remember feeling so special for an adult to meet me eye to eye in this way, to appear to care so deeply for me. I don't know that I ever did turn to him for support, but he gave me a great gift that day. Though I may not remember the details that surrounded that moment, but that offering of eye to eye contact and compassion has never left me. He had already given me a gift by being present to me in this way and by inviting me into relationship with him.

What captivated me most in our story this week is the eye to eye contact between John and Peter and the man who was begging at the temple gate. The Common English Bible tells us they stared at him. Other translations render that "looked intently at him." We are told by the author of Acts that this man was carried by his friends to the temple gate every day at 3:00 to be well positioned for support at the appointed hour for prayer. We are also told that he had been crippled since birth so day after day for YEARS this was

only way to make a living. He was wholly dependent on friends to move him and people to give to him. I imagine that many walked past him without looking at him. It's easy to overlook one seated when you are upright. It's also easy to overlook things that don't change—the same man, in the same circumstances, there every single day.... Eventually he becomes invisible. Also... we know, don't we, that when we don't have money to give one who is begging, or we are not willing to give money for several good, principled reasons, or just because... we often don't look at the one asking us for money. We walk by and look anywhere else. I've done it. I'm sure several of you have too. So it is striking that Peter and John stare at him, give him their full, undivided attention. This is unusual, surely.

And the first thing they say to the man is "Look at us!" They invite him to meet them eye to eye. This suggests that the man was looking down, perhaps in humility, perhaps in shame, perhaps in discouragement... a lifetime of physical limitation and utter dependence can tend to turn one's gaze downward. But they invite him to look up, to engage in a person-to-person connection with them. And he does. Perhaps he brightened as he did. If they had stopped, were looking at him, and invited him to look at them they were respecting him as a fellow human, and they were likely going to give him money. But I want us to notice that they have already given him a gift by being present to him in this way and by inviting him into relationship with them. This is a powerful gift. And for disempowered, vulnerable people, it is unusual.

Peter and John don't have money to give, but they do have Jesus. And so they freely share what they do have—the power of life and love and liberation that filled them when the Spirit of the resurrected Christ came to indwell them. They invite him to rise up and walk, in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene. And they don't just speak, they reach out their hands and take his hand and help him up. God strengthens his feet and ankles and for the first time ever he walks. And he not only walks, he leaps! He goes into the temple for the first time ever on his own two feet, walking and leaping for joy. And again he is

seen, now by people who have seen him before and can't believe what they are seeing now. They are filled with wonder and amazement. This is incredibly unusual.

And this, friends, is the church. Spirit-filled believers coming face to face with the pain and need in the world and responding in mercy. Perhaps Christ does not work through us to provide spontaneous, miraculous healing, but surely Christ works through us to meet other human beings eye to eye, to honor them as fellow children of God, and to do whatever we can to bear a presence of hope to them—and this, friends, has healing power. I met a man years ago in New York City who was formerly homeless. He shared through tears that he was in his 40's before he ever realized that HE is a beloved child of God. He was convinced he was trash. The world treated him thus. He treated himself thus. But somehow someone shared the good news of God's love for him in a way that he could hear it. Somehow as a full-grown man, he came to identify as a beloved child of God. And this was the beginning of massive transformation for him. I don't know how this message got through... but I imagine it began with mercy shown, with eye to eye contact, with a personal relationship that revealed the dignity in his personhood.

A friend helped me see that the gift the man in our Bible story received is the gift of community, restoration to the community. And the community received this gift at the same time—he was joyfully restored to their fellowship. It's not a one-way transfer. It's a mutual upbuilding. This is how it goes when the church carries out our ministry of presence and relationship-building.

I think it was so for St. A's many years ago when members of this church came alongside an unhoused mother and child and supported them in many ways, surely many eye to eye conversations included, on their journey to housing and have continued to support them in the many years since. I remember hearing about this when I was interviewing with your search committee 7 years ago and hearing the surprise and delight folks had in the fact that this mother and son had become active members in the St. A's community despite living quite a distance away. I know it is so for members who are working with SW Outreach now, encountering unhoused neighbors eye to eye in their camps and

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when they come for showers and laundry and hot meals at Riversgate. Fears and prejudices are melting away in the volunteer. And community is being shaped. I hope that several of you will sign up for the Civic Circle here at St. A's next Wednesday, April 17. This is an opportunity for housed and unhoused neighbors to engage in eye to eye conversation and hopefully emerge with deeper understanding and compassion and a true sense of connection. If you tend to avert your eyes from unhoused neighbors, despite having empathy and compassion for their plight, if you have difficulty knowing how to relate, I hope you'll sign up today.

Peter and John left an apparently cozy community of love (check out the end of chapter 2) to step into a world of need, and the healing that came through their ministry produced both awe and conflict. That's what you'll find if you keep reading in Acts. Many came to believe in Jesus because of this act, but some were threatened by this act and by the speech that followed it. For us to be the living church, we need to carry a ministry of presence out into the world of so much need and pain. I invite you to spend time every day putting your attention on whatever needs are in your awareness and holding these in God's light—stare at them, invite them to look back at you—and you may be spurred by focusing your attention in this way to particular acts of mercy—acts of generosity to those on the front lines or on the streets, gifts given, outreach calls or cards or letters or texts or e-mails... And if anyone wonders why you're showing mercy, tell them it's because you belong to Jesus and it is Jesus working through you.

Friends, you too will be amazed at what the presence of God's Spirit, that same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead, can achieve in and through you.

Resources, in addition to scripture, that significantly influenced this sermon:

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. "Episode 37 Acts 3:1-16 Peter and John Heal a Man." *BibleWorm* podcast, April 19, 2020. [https:// www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-037-acts-31-17-peter-and-john-heal-a-man/](https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-037-acts-31-17-peter-and-john-heal-a-man/)

William H. Willimon. *Acts in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, eds James L. Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press. 1988.