

Britt Carlson
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The Community Church of Issaquah
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“The Way Finds Us”

Acts 3:1-16

All growing up my family had a beloved yellow lab named Thor. Now Thor may not have the brightest of the bunch, but he definitely was well loved and oh so well loveable. Poor thing though, with a family of three girls this 90-pound dog somehow seemed to end up with painted nails and little bows a lot more often than was necessary. I can still remember the mournful looks he'd give as we would dandified him.

One of my favorite things that Thor did was when you tried to look at him, his eyes could never quite meet yours. You'd look him in the eyes and his eyes would sliiiiide away to the right or sliiiiide away to the left. Definitely none of the alpha male in this yellow lab.

Why can it be so hard to look at some else in the eye? I know that Thor isn't alone in his aversion to looking straight at another person.

Peter's words to the lame man are so bold and so challenging. "Look at us," he says. He doesn't say good morning, he doesn't make side-eyed small chat. Scripture says Peter fixes his gaze on the man and says, "Look at us!" It takes guts to look at another person. Looking at another person can reveal so much about ourselves. We are easily scared by what we might see in those pair of eyes staring back at us.

Today there is something for us to look at too. Like Thor we may want to sliiiiide our eyes away, but it's something we can look at

because what we learn from the lame man is that if we have the courage to look, there is a possibility of a healing more profound than anything we could dare hope for on our own.

The thing I want us to look at today is what was going on in the middle of the 19th century in the United States. In the mid-19th century the States were torn by the problem of slavery. Across denominations, the church was feeling the pressure from both sides. For Baptists, everything came to a head in the year 1845. That was the year the Baptist Home Missionary Society refused to send a man from Georgia out as a missionary because he was a slave-owner believing that he had the right to own his black brothers and sisters as property. The Baptists in the south were enraged at the Missionary Society's refusal and decided that they were going to break away and form their own convention.

Let's pause for a moment and look more closely. Baptist Christians in the south were more committed to preserving slavery than maintaining fellowship with their brothers and sisters in the north.

Right before our story about the lame man, the book of Acts describes an amazing event. The Spirit has just come down in tongues of fire, 3,000 people have become followers of Christ, and what do the people do? They sell all their possessions and give the proceeds to anyone who needs anything. They begin spending as much time as possible together in the temple. And they start having their

new brothers and sisters over for dinner on a regular basis. Through the work of the Spirit, a fellowship was being formed. A fellowship characterized by the joy of being together.

This is the mark of the way of Jesus Christ. The mark is JOY. The joy of fellowship. The joy of finding that the fractures that have separated us are now amazingly healed. And this is why what happened in 1845 when the Baptists broke apart is so striking for us as Christians. It's the opposite of fellowship. It's schism [sihz-em].

And here's the thing. The real break, it wasn't between the Northern Baptists and the Southern Baptists. In 1890 the Baptists up north—the Baptists who would become the American Baptists—would follow the path of their southern brethren and go on to refuse to publish anything written by black pastors. Ultimately, the split wasn't the south breaking fellowship with the north. The real split was white Christians breaking fellowship with black Christians. It was white believers refusing the joy of eating with and learning from and sharing the lives of their black brothers and sisters.

In the illogical, incomprehensible way of sin our Baptist forbears chose to cut themselves off from fellowship and from joy.

Now if Acts ended in chapter 2, we might have reason to despair because if we read just the two first chapters there's no story to tell about people who find themselves on the outside of the fellowship.

But today we are given chapter 3 and in chapter 3 the church encounters someone who *is* cut off from the fellowship because today Peter and John encounter the lame man

begging for alms outside of the temple's Beautiful Gate.

Here is a person who spends his days peering through the temple's gate, watching at a distance as the community inside draws near to one another in worship. Being lame, even if he were able to pull himself across the threshold into the temple, he still wouldn't have been allowed to enter into the inner sanctuary. According to levitical law, those who were lame were considered ritually unclean and were unable to serve as priests.

Now not only was the man unable to participate fully in temple life, he also would have been labeled a sinner. Remember that when Jesus heals the blind man in the Gospel of John, the disciples' question is "Rabbi, who sinned this man or his parents that he was born blind?" In Christ's time, being disabled was seen by many as the result of sin. And so this man would have sat day after day at the Beautiful Gate excluded from the full joy of fellowship watching a joy that he could not experience himself. An outsider and a sinner.

He knew what he could hope for. He could hope for the small coins that would provide for his daily needs. At the very most he could hope for perhaps some silver and gold that might provide beyond the single day's necessities.

And then along come Peter and John. Peter and John who are coming from the nightly dinners and the shared life with the new and dear friends they have encountered in this Spirit-filled existence. They come in fullness of joy...and yet that joy doesn't blind them to this outsider sitting on the steps. No, the joy gives them the ability *to look*.

Peter stops and says, “Look at me.” The man looks at Peter expecting to receive what he has always received. But this is the moment when everything changes. “I don’t have money,” Peter says. [I guess when you’ve given up all your possessions you don’t have spare change on you.] “I don’t have money, but what I do have I give to you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth be healed.”

Immediately, the man jumps up healed and what does Acts say? “And he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God” (3:8). This is not just a miracle of healing. This is a miracle of *inclusion*. Of inclusion into the fellowship of one who was not supposed to be included. This man who was once on the outside is now on the inside. The man who sat at the gate peering at an unreachable fellowship in is now dancing and leaping for joy within the temple courtyard.

I love how Acts describes it: he literally clings to Peter and John. He is made an intimate part of the community.

This man had hoped only for silver and gold and instead he received full healing. He had expected just spare change and instead was adopted into the family of God.

Here’s the thing about the work of God. What we see over and over again in Scripture is that is unanticipatable.

For example, before Jesus came, the Jews were anticipating a Messiah who would rescue them, but no one could have imagined that the Messiah would be God himself coming down in human form. And as the book of Acts gets going we are going to see

ever more and more that the things the Spirit leads the church to do and the people who the Spirit leads the church toward being in fellowship with are not at all what the church has been expecting.

In fact, some of the things that the Holy Spirit is going to instruct this new community to do seem initially to be downright wrong—like fellowshipping with impure Gentiles and eating unclean animals.

But here in chapter 3 all of those unexpected inclusions have yet to be. For now, God’s work begins with this lame man being healed of his infirmity and he who was outside now being brought in.

The work of God is unexpected...and yet it is so much better than we could have imagined. It is healing when we expected only silver, fellowship when we expected only gold. God’s thoughts are not our thoughts nor are God’s ways our ways. They are so much higher.

You know, we have already begun that courageous act of looking. An interesting thing that I’ve been keeping my eye on as I’ve been here at the Community Church of Issaquah is our participation in the Evergreen Association. Begun just fifteen years ago, our Evergreen Association brings together white, black, Hispanic and Asian churches together to further God’s kingdom. We partner together in mission, and some of you have gone on our Haiti trips. During our associational meetings, we listen to one another and take time to build consensus even when the journey of communication is not straightforward.

I think our joint missional work is powerful,

and I think that our caucus and consensus structure is unique and profoundly Christian, but what if there is even more going on here. Maybe we think we're dealing with silver and gold, maybe we think we're trying to figure out how to provide for the needs of the day, but maybe there is something else that is happening.

I don't know what that might be. Remember, the work of God is unanticipatable. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts! But maybe, as we break bread with and learn from and share the lives of our brothers and sisters here in Seattle, we too might be surprised by joy.

You know, one of the leaders of the Southern Baptists—the same Southern Baptists who broke fellowship back in 1845—might be part of pointing the way forward for us. Russell Moore, the president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, has started to speak about issues of race and theology in the US. Recently I read an interesting quote of his. He says, “Racial reconciliation is not something white people do for *other* people.” What he is saying is that there is good news. White Baptists have a part in God's story. But what he is also saying is that if white Baptists are a part of the story then they are not Peter and John. They are the lame man...and the lame man lying at the Beautiful Gate, separated from the fellowship, does not have the resources to heal himself. The lame man is the one with the need—the one who needs Peter and John to walk by and to look at him.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God for Christians today who like Peter and John are willing to look for those on the outside of the

fellowship. And thanks be to God that God's will is to heal in unanticipatable ways.

In story of God there is a place for everyone. In the church of Jesus Christ the unlikely become the included. And in the work of the Spirit, the lame are seen and are healed. So receive the good news. When we are called, don't let your eyes slide away. Instead look, for maybe just maybe silver will be surpassed with healing and gold overcome in all-encompassing joy. Amen.