

The Bible is full of stories of miraculous healings, and we could sure use some around here. But as I thought about this story in Acts, I realized that the actual healing wasn't the only amazing thing going on here. For starters, I marveled at how this man had ever managed to make it into adulthood at a time when there were no protections or accommodations for people with disabilities.

What is the real miracle here is that he wasn't completely shut out of the community. He apparently had friends and they were faithful in assisting him. "People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms...." [3:2] Now anyone who has ever been a caregiver for someone who isn't able to do things for themselves knows what a tremendous responsibility this is. His friends knew that it's a long, long road, with many a winding turn, that would lead them to who knows where. But they were

strong, strong enough to carry him. He ain't heavy, he's their brother. [song by Bobby Scott and Bob Russell]

But it wasn't just this group of advocates that kept this man alive. He was a member of a society that, unlike our own, at least tolerated the presence of the poor. In his world, begging wasn't a crime and giving to a beggar was what pious people were expected to do. In that sense, the poor had social value. Giving to them got you into heaven.

So, even if Peter and John had never shown up, this man had it better than a lot of poor people do today. But he was still a far cry from having it good. Notice that the man was asking for money, not healing. And while it is true that money would answer some of his immediate needs for food and shelter, money was not going to touch his deeper need.

We experience the same thing when we meet panhandlers on the street, don't we? We can give them money or socks or buy them a meal and we should, but all the while we are

painfully aware that we are only dispensing Band-Aids and not soul aid. What they need beyond the next meal or the next shower or the next fix are things that maybe they gave up on a long time ago: love, forgiveness, belonging, and healing. Maybe they figure we won't give them those things or they don't deserve them. But it's also possible that they just don't know what they need.

Because a lot of us don't know what we need. One day about a year ago, I was getting dressed and put on some old black shoes. A little later I was sitting down and glanced at my feet, and lo and behold I had big holes in both shoes. One of them big enough to put my hand through! Now since these holes had probably not appeared overnight, I wondered how long I'd been wearing my shoes that way. Obviously, it was time for a new pair of shoes. But the pun was not lost on me. I suspected that if I had asked Peter for some money to buy new shoes, he would have said to me, "I have no silver or gold, but

you don't really need another pair of shoes. What are you going to do about the holes in your soul?"

The man in Acts didn't need money as much as he needed healing. But it's awfully easy to neglect your biggest need when you have to struggle day in and day out to fill even the small ones. We forget about the holes in our souls because it's easier to fix the holes in our shoes.

Another reason that we don't ask for the healing we need is that we get used to the holes in our souls, don't we, just as the man had gotten used to his disability. He had a routine. His life was arranged. And he didn't go around asking for healing because he didn't even consider that he could be healed. After all, he'd been this way from birth. It was the only reality he knew. Being able to walk and leap was beyond his conception and not many of us know how to ask for what we cannot conceive. Sometimes the healing we really need is something we can't conceive. Call it a disability of the imagination.

Nevertheless, it is something to celebrate that we are beginning to conceive of treatments for all kinds of disabling diseases and injuries. The advances in stem cell research and prosthetics and robotics: it's all so exciting, and it's making the previously impossible look more and more inevitable.

So I don't want to knock the possibilities for physical healing, but there is healing beyond the physical, too. For this man, there is a strength that goes beyond what his feet and ankles lack. And it all begins with a look. "Peter looked intently at him, as did John...." [3:4] Now, how many times did people pass by this man on their way to the temple, even dropped a few coins in his hand, without ever looking at him, without ever seeing him? But Peter and John looked intently at him and he fixed his attention on them. And that's when he realized that Peter and John weren't just dispensers of coins. They were disciples of Christ. And something happened when their eyes locked.

I was reading the paper last week, and Japanese researchers have discovered that when your dog looks up at you adoringly, the same thing happens in your brain as when your newborn looks at you. You fall in love. In fact, in both dog and human, the brain gets a flood of the love hormone oxytocin and an unshakeable bond is formed. We've always known that dogs were master manipulators, just like children, when it comes to getting their humans to feed and care for them and give them belly rubs. Now you know why. Dogs have evolved to tap into a primary mode of human communication: eye-to-eye contact. And, as any dog lover will tell you, wonderful things can happen. [*NY Times*, April 16, 2015]

When Peter and John looked intently at the man who couldn't walk, they looked at him with love, and the hormones started to flow, and an extraordinary bond was formed. But there's something more. Because no one had ever looked at this man this way before. People had been merciful enough to

help, had given him small bits of silver or gold, but no one had given him the love that comes directly from God through Jesus Christ. And that love always has a transformative effect.

In this story, we get a physical effect. The man's feet and ankles became strong, enabling this guy who had not used his legs for his entire life to jump up and go into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God. [3:8] Something like a dam was breaking. Something was letting go and flying free. And while we will never know what that man felt like, we can know what God's love feels like when we let God look at us and we look back at God and we hold that gaze for long enough to fall in love. Then the healing starts to flow.

You could say that every one of us has a disability or two or three. And while those disabilities may not be visible, they are surely there. Just ask the people who have to live with you. Now that doesn't give us all an excuse to use the disabled parking, but realizing that disabilities are not confined to a

certain segment of the population does give us an opportunity to be more honest and open about what we need. Why is it that we have a habit of asking for money instead of healing? What is in us that is unable to walk or is dying to be set free? What keeps us from jumping up, walking and leaping and praising God? When is the last time we locked eyes with our loving God?

I am so blessed to be able to schedule my day so that I can lock eyes with God out in the beauty of nature. Three mornings a week, I lift up my eyes to the hills from where my help comes. [Psalm 121] And while I'm on the trail, I always pray for those who, for reason of age, illness or disability, can't join me. But no matter what, everyone needs to get out in nature and spend time gazing at the work of our Creator and not just on Earth Day.

I was happy to be out at Veggielution yesterday, because I got to see the paths that we built last year so that people in

wheel chairs and babies in strollers could get up close and personal with plants, hear the chickens cluck and the peacocks screech, feel the sun on their skin and the dirt in their fingers. What a way to take an industrial wasteland under a freeway overpass and turn it into a beautiful garden.

Something about scarred land and scarred people makes the gift of life seem that much more precious and beautiful. So I'll leave you with my final thought. Maybe this particular gate on the Temple Mount was called the Beautiful Gate, not in spite of but because of the fact that the disabled man was begging there. For had it not been for him, the people that day would not have seen the beauty of the love that God in Christ wanted to give to them. And to us. Praise God.