

## Such As I Have

Isaiah 58:10-11; Psalm 5:1-3; Acts 3:1-10

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The account that was read from the Acts of the Apostles this morning is an account of commitment and prayer and compassion. All of those things resulted in the miraculous healing of a man who had never walked for 40 years, not since the day of his birth.

It was three o'clock the hour of afternoon prayer at the Temple. Everyone of Jewish heritage was expected to pray three times a day, once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and again toward the close of the day. Peter and John were Jewish Christians. They continued to observe the times of prayer in addition to their other responsibilities with the newly created Church.

It would not have been unusual for beggars to be found sitting outside the Temple. They were not allowed to enter and participate in the times of prayer because of their infirmities. The fact that they had infirmities was considered by the religious hierarchy to be a curse placed upon them by God for some sin that they or their parents had committed.

On this day, as perhaps every day, this man was brought by someone to sit outside the Gate Beautiful, the most ornate entrance to the Temple area. His only means of gainful employment was begging. That was all that he could do. No doubt he cried out to everyone who passed by for any money that they might give him. Perhaps those who were going into the Temple for prayer would be the most vulnerable to responding to the needs of these pitiable people.

In our enlightened day about physical handicaps and their many treatments, it is hard for us to imagine how hard life must have been for this man and so many others.

On this day the beggar's life would forever be changed. Every day hundreds of people would have passed by him. We can imagine that many of those going into the Temple tried

- to avoid eye contact,
- to hurry by him so as not to feel obligated to help him in any way.

Yet, on this day, something was different. On this day

- Peter and John *saw* the man;
- they looked into his eyes;
- they saw someone who needed more than that for which he was asking.

Peter seems to know immediately what to do for this man. Somehow Peter knew that he had the power of Christ within him to bring healing and wholeness to this man's body. Perhaps deep within his being he remembered the words of Jesus who had told his disciples that they would do greater miracles than He had done.

Perhaps Peter also remembered another teaching of Jesus to his disciples. Jesus had taught his disciples "Be compassionate, just as God is compassionate. And do not judge and you will not be judged; and do not condemn and you will not be condemned; pardon and you will be pardoned. Give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over..." (Luke 6:36-38a)

No doubt Peter and John had read the words of the Psalms describing God as having the tenderness of a father to his children (Psalm 103:13-14) or God's love and care for all God has created, without exception (Psalm 145:8-9). In fact Psalm 145 would have been part of the afternoon prayer that they would have prayed every day at three o'clock.

Even though Peter and John had read and prayed these passages many times, they had *heard* Jesus saying that compassion was one of the expectations of those who would follow Him.

Peter says to the man "Look at us." Lift up your head. We don't have any money, but we have something better, and we will give you what we have. We will give you the wholeness that you have never had in your body. We will give you the dignity that you have never had. We will make it possible for you to enter the Temple to pray. We will introduce you to the Person of Jesus who makes this possible.

Oh, what a day! It was a day that this man could never have dreamed would happen. He could never have imagined standing on his feet and leaping and praising God. But that's what happened. Peter took him by the hand and he stood up for the first time in his life. No longer was he a spectacle that drew other people's derision. No longer was he an outsider. No longer would he sit at the entrance of the Temple. Now, for the first time in his life, he would enter to pray and worship.

We live in a day of modern medicine and sometimes what seems like miraculous healing. Even a few years ago we could not have imagined the treatments and procedures that are available to us today. But we still live in a world where there is much pain and brokenness that is not visible to the naked eye.

So how are we to respond as those who have been taught by Jesus to have compassion? Henri Nouwen, a Catholic theologian, who unfortunately is no longer with us, studied much about compassion, or the lack thereof, in the life of Christians and in society in general. He found that compassion is sometimes a rare commodity in a world that is dominated by the principles of power and control.

Having compassion requires a total conversion of heart and mind. A call to be compassionate, as Jesus taught, goes to the very roots of our being. Compassion is a radical way of thinking and being and acting. It is the compassion of God that we have received within our own lives that allows us, motivates us, to compassionate *discipleship*.

Being compassionate is not always easy. The word *compassion* is derived from the Latin, meaning "to suffer with." Being compassionate can require us

- to go where there is confusion,
- to enter into places of pain,
- to share in the brokenness of others,
- to experience the anguish of others.

If you read the rest of the story in Acts, you will read that there is a response of those who have seen the healing and it gives Peter an opportunity to preach again the sermon that he preached on the day of Pentecost. There is a great, positive, response of the people.

The Temple priests and the Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead, become upset enough that they summon the Temple guard and have Peter and John put in prison for their actions and teaching.

Fortunately, they are released from prison because the news of the miracle could not be denied and they were fearful of the people.

Being a compassionate person probably will never put you in prison, but it will exact a cost of your

- energy,
- time,
- patience,
- emotions,
- perseverance.

It will cause you to be more conscious of those around you who

- bear the scars of hard events that they have endured,
- have been crippled in their spirit by the situations over which they have had no control,
- carry burdens too heavy for any one person to bear.

Let me make clear that compassion is not the same as pity. Pity can feel sorry for the plight of another, but do nothing about it personally. Compassion leads to action. And when action happens, both the giver and the receiver will be changed. Both lives will be affected.

The paralyzed man was healed. The disciples were assured within themselves that what Jesus had promised them was true. They would be his agents of grace and healing of all kinds to others.

The same Spirit of God that lived within those disciples lives within all who are followers of Jesus Christ. Each one of us has a special ability to help others in some way. When we decide to allow that to happen, we will find that our lives will be changed. Our

- anxiety about doing what we are able to do will be turned to assurance;
- efforts will become accomplishments;
- successes will bring joy.

Remember the words of Isaiah.

“And if you give yourself to the hungry,  
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,  
then your light will rise in darkness,  
and your gloom will become like midday.  
and the Lord will continually guide you,  
and satisfy your soul in scorched places,  
and give strength to your bones,  
and you will be like a watered garden,  
and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

(Isaiah 58:10-11)

Amen.