

One Sunday morning the pastor was very perturbed. It was almost time for the service to begin but he couldn't get the microphone to work. In frustration he paced up and down the aisle and stewed and spewed. He pushed every button he could think of. Finally, he said, “This *blankety, blank* microphone isn't working!” At that precise moment, one of the ushers went to the master control board for the sound system, turned the switch to “on” and the pastor's words were broadcast live to everyone in the sanctuary. The startled congregation immediately responded, “And also with you.” Something like that is going on in our story today, except it isn't only curses that are coming through the sound system, but blessings. Peter preaches to the Jews gathered around the man lame from birth who he had just healed “In the Name of Jesus.”

Doug Bratt writes, “When our family visited China a number of years ago, my wife had a hard time keeping up with our two sons who stand over 6 feet 4 inches tall. So, we'd often walk a few steps behind them. As we did so, we lost count of how many people passed them, turned around and then just boldly stared at our tall sons. It didn't surprise our son who told us that as a teacher in China, he noticed Chinese people generally have little compunction about staring at other people. Yet those stares surprised us, because our parents and society had taught that it's impolite to stare at people. We were taught when we feel the need to gawk, we should do our best not to get caught staring.”

Yet it seems a lot of people do much staring at each other in Acts 3. Verse 4 reports that “*Peter looked straight at him,*” literally, “*stared at*” the man who has never been able to walk. In verse 5 we read that “*the man gave them his attention,*” literally, “*he stared at them.*” And verse 12 adds that Peter asks the people, “*Why do you stare at us?*” Why all this staring?

Those apostles haven't yet separated themselves from their Jewish community, so they no doubt join other faithful Jews in praying three times a day at Jerusalem's temple. On one of their afternoon trips, Peter and John meet a man

whose never been able to walk. Every day his friends or family bring him to sit at the temple gate called Beautiful. It was the custom for beggars to sit at the entrance to a temple or a shrine. Such a place was considered the best location because when people are on their way to worship God, they are predisposed to be generous to their fellow human beings. W.H. Davies, the tramp poet, tells how one of his vagrant friends told him that whenever he came into a new town, he looked for a church spire with a cross on the top and began to beg in that area because love of man and love of God must ever go hand in hand.”

This man who is physically impaired begs Peter and John for money. Since he assumes the best he can hope for is a handout, he may even stretch out his hand to the apostles. When Peter answers, *“I don’t even have a nickel to my name,”* the beggar’s outstretched hand may turn into a fist as he mutters, *“Just another tightwad temple goer!”* The man who is physically impaired may even look past Peter for the next person from whom to beg. Yet Peter’s words probably turned his head right back. *“What I do have I give you,”* the apostle announces. *“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!”*

Money is a source of controversy throughout the book of Acts. A church community that shares everything with its members doesn’t seem to have much gold or silver left over to share with outsiders. Yet God has generously given the apostles what was a source of contention for Jesus: the power to heal people. So, Peter grabs the hand of the man who has never been able to walk and helps him up off his mat. The man who had never been able to walk then walks, runs and jumps through the temple. He goes from lying helpless and dependent outside the temple to dancing and praising God inside it.

When Jesus commissioned his twelve disciples, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and cure diseases. In a similar way, while Jesus’ first followers may not have much *“silver or gold,”* they do have the power to heal in the name of Jesus. Evidence of the power God gives to the disciples to heal the man who is physically disabled naturally draws a lot of attention. Just as Peter, John and the man who couldn’t walk had earlier stared

at each other, now people come running to stare at all of them. The man who couldn't walk stared at them because he expected nothing more from them than what anyone had ever given him. His neighbors now stare at the apostles because they've given the man more than anyone would have ever expected.

However, Peter and John don't try to turn their newfound fame into a spot on some kind of ancient TV talk show. Neither Peter nor John nor the man they've just healed are the central point of this "Acting Lesson." God is! Even the man the apostles heal understands that. Verse 8 reports that after he is healed, he goes into the temple courts, "*walking, and jumping and praising God.*"

Peter and John deflect all the attention onto Jesus by begging people to receive God's grace and put their faith in him. They essentially tell those whom their healing has drawn to them to stop *staring at them* and start wondrously staring at "*the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers*" (v. 13). Yet what Peter says about their relationship to God is blunt and potentially damning. It's another example of how, as Will Willimon says, (*Acts*, John Knox Press, p. 46) there's "no substitutional atonement in Luke, no notion that Jesus Christ had to die to satisfy some divine requirement of justice. No. The explanation for Jesus' death in Acts is simply *human perversity*." Can you imagine what tone of voice Peter uses to describe this perversity? Does he deride his audience? Does he speak with sadness? His tone of voice may shape how we hear what he says: "*You handed [Jesus] over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.*" This is what Peter tells the people who stare at him in verses 14-15: "*You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life!*" We generally assume that Peter is addressing a group of people who are Jewish. He is speaking to people who come running to him from the area near the temple. Besides, he speaks of "*God of our fathers.*"

Christians have sometimes used Peter's accusation of shared responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion to justify persecuting Jews. Yet while Christians have historically blamed Jewish people for this treachery, the Scriptures insist that

all of us, both Gentile and Jew, somehow share culpability for the death of the Messiah. So, it's more biblically accurate to imagine Peter say to us modern day Gentiles who hear his message, "*We disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released. We killed the author of life...*"

Yet Acts 3 also insists that our murderous treachery isn't the last word on the subject. "*You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead*" Peter says in verse 15. In doing so, he underscores the stark difference between God's and the crowd's actions. Peter even highlights the way God used human treachery to fulfill what God "*had foretold through all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer*" as he says in verse 18.

Peter links the God of Israel's ancestors to Jesus Christ in ways that many of his Jewish contemporaries strongly rejected. He insists it's "*The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers*" who "*glorified his servant Jesus.*" (v. 13). It's the kind of bold testimony that will get the apostles both persecuted and, in some cases, executed.

The apostle insists that God graciously met human rejection with divine acceptance. God responded to human violence with the gift of life. God met human murder with divine resurrection. God, quite simply, met human *perversity* with divine *grace*.

And what, according to not just Peter but also all of Scripture, is the most appropriate response to this gift of life and healing? It's repentance. In swapping the life-giving Jesus for the death-dealing Barabbas, we chose the way of death. God, however, through Peter, invites us to turn from the way of death and toward the way of life that is repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Last year a friend of mine told me the story of his father. He spoke of how, for many years, his father binged out, how his father was a drunk—a man who when sober was kind and gentle—and when drunk, well, he was something else entirely. He had no control over his actions and this kind and gentle man

brought pain and suffering upon others, or at least the force within him did so. The family had to move, to change homes and communities, almost every year. Landlords were cheated, employers disappointed, children neglected, friends abandoned, or embarrassed, or betrayed.

And this continued until one day, after taking his children to Sunday School, after doing so for a long period of time, after witnessing the faith of others and what faith did in their lives, he received Jesus into his life. He asked God to take control, to guide his actions and to save him from the power of sin *in Jesus' name*. Things began to change; debts still had to be paid, amends still had to be made, mistakes still occurred. But the inner man—the man that God made—was set free from an addiction that had debilitated him to grow into a new man and experience a new maturity. No more booze. A lot more prayer. And the love and kindness of the man that could be glimpsed before—in his moments of sobriety—became apparent for all to see, for days, weeks, and finally years on end. The children who were still living at home stopped fearing what would happen next. They began to look forward to being with their father. They began to develop their own faith in God, a faith that still guides them to this day.

This man, this husband, this father, experienced a changed life. He went from being controlled by the devil to being in God's control, and the result was the renewal of the image of God in him. At the end, when his earthly tent was destroyed, the result was a building from God; a house not made with hands; eternal in the heavens.

The whole modus operandi of the healing of this man who was lame from birth, and whenever and however healing happens, is plainly stated in verse 16: *“By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.”* I've heard wise doctors say, “I bandage the wounds, but God does the healing.” In the name of Jesus there are still miracles all around us today, if only we have the eyes to see. Amen.