

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Spirit-Led Church

Acts 3:1-10

Some of you are familiar with the old hymn, "Sweet Hour of Prayer." The first verse says, "Sweet hour of prayer! / Sweet hour of prayer! / That calls me from a world of care, / And bids me at my Father's throne / Make all my wants and wishes known. / In seasons of distress and grief, / My soul has often found relief, / And oft escaped the tempter's snare, / By thy return, sweet hour of prayer!"

That's what our church gatherings, especially congregational worship, can often feel like. A sweet hour of prayer that comes around each week. A time to step aside from our life in the world and assemble for encouragement and renewal. A time to renew ties with our spiritual kin within the familiar and cozy confines of our sanctuary. A time to retreat from the challenges, struggles, and temptations of life beyond the walls of the church. There's certainly something to be said for coming together in order to experience warm and supportive Christian fellowship.

We see some of that in the Scripture passage I read earlier in our service. At the conclusion of the second chapter of Acts, Luke gives us an inspiring picture of the early church at its best. Empowered and enabled by the Holy Spirit, the believers gathered to hear the Word of God, to be in fellowship, to break the bread, and to pray together. God's saving power was active and effective in their life together. Their worship experiences were moving and powerful. Miracles, especially acts of healing, were abundant. These followers of Jesus shared generously from their money and possessions. There was a gladness about their gatherings, and the Lord was adding new believers to their community on a regular basis.

With God working in such wonderful ways within their congregation, why should these believers venture out beyond the boundaries of their fellowship? Isn't it better just to devote themselves to making sure that things keep running smoothly within the church, rather than diverting attention to circumstances beyond their four walls? Clearly, the answer is no, based on today's other Scripture passage from Acts. When we move from chapter two to chapter three, Luke shifts our focus from the internal life of the church to its external witness in the larger world. We see that the church's musical repertoire is growing. They don't just know "Sweet Hour of Prayer." They also sing "We've a Story to Tell."

In today's primary text, telling the gospel story takes the form of a healing miracle. Peter and John are on their way to the temple to pray. As I've noted, regular gathering for worship is an essential part of life together within the community of Jesus' followers. But not as an escape from the brokenness of a world that's still in need of God's full redemption. As one commentator has put it, "The path toward significant prayer is a way that goes straight through, not around, human misery."¹

In this case, human misery encounters the church and its leaders in the form of a man who has been physically disabled from the day he was born. Inside the Lord's house, important business is going on. But Peter and John realize that there's also important business that needs to be done outside the sanctuary. They could have passed him by. They could have

viewed him as an obstacle to overcome, a hurdle to cross, or an interruption to avoid. But they didn't. Instead, they stopped and allowed the gospel to do its work.

I emphasize the power of the gospel itself because there's more going on here than just two human beings trying to improve the life of another human being. In the first two chapters of Acts, we've seen the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is given to empower, to lead, and to guide Jesus' followers in their kingdom mission. They've been anointed, with "power from on high" (Luke 24:49), to extend the reign of God through the restoration of human lives, including broken bodies.

But they can only do so through Jesus. That's why his name gets invoked, not as some magical formula that his followers can use to manipulate divine power, but because Jesus' name is an expression of his essence, his presence, through the Spirit. If any saving blessings are to come from heaven, they must come in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Yes, the faces that the man sees are the faces of Peter and John. The voice that the man hears is the voice of Peter. The hand that grasps him and raises him up is the hand of Peter. But the miracle belongs to Jesus. As one commentator has put it, "The power was Christ's but the hand was Peter's."²

Over time, this helpless and desperate man on the doorstep of God's house had seen countless worshipers come and go. Some had given him money. Some had given him just a glance. Others hadn't even given him that much. But no one had ever given him what Peter and John had to share, the healing power of the gospel. And one of the reasons God did such a wonderful thing in this man's life was Peter and John's willingness to be Spirit-led. That means being sensitive to and responsive to the Spirit's prompting and guidance during the course of daily events and activities.

Remember that Peter and John were on their way to fulfill their religious duties. They were headed to worship. It was the time of the day when they were accustomed to giving God their attention. But that didn't mean paying no attention to the circumstances of those who were along their path to the house of the Lord. In fact, being attentive to God meant being attentive to others who needed God's saving mercy, including the man who asked them for money. Peter and John "looked straight at him," says Luke (v. 4). Then Peter said, "Look at us." Notice how the healing, life-giving power of the gospel was conveyed in part by eye contact, by the act of seeing. In other words, through their willingness to pay attention to the man, to focus on him, and to be available to him, Peter and John were available to God, whose redeeming, restoring grace operated through them for the benefit of the man who needed their help.

Authors Lance Ford and Brad Briscoe have written about the profound loneliness that so many people experience in our world, which contributes to the sense that they have very little value at all. Ford and Briscoe point out that we even contribute to others' lack of a sense of self-worth by such things as failing to lift our heads to offer a simple greeting. They contrast this with the practice that author Peter Senge noticed among the tribes of northern Natal in South Africa:

The most common greeting, equivalent to "hello" in English, is the expression: *Sawu bona*. It literally means, "I see you." If you are a member of the tribe, you might reply by saying *Sikhona*, "I am here." The order of the exchange is important: until you see me, I do not exist. It's as if, when you see me, you bring me into existence.

"A deep truth resides in this cultural practice," Ford and Briscoe observe. "When we merely move throughout our days without seeing people as *people*, then as far as it matters to us in that moment, they really don't exist. . . . [But] being conscious of how we approach people we encounter through the normal routines of our day is a step toward bringing . . . heaven here on our patch of earth."³

Perhaps that's part of what Peter and John did for the man who asked for their help. By being responsive to the Spirit's leadership and prompting, they took this man, who had become virtually invisible to so many, and brought him into existence, not just as he was, but in a totally new and transformed way. They brought the power and life of heaven here to his patch of earth.

Now this man was no longer unseen, ignored, or excluded. He was now made whole through Christ. Peter said to him, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." And walk he did. He took his new, fully functioning feet and ankles and walked with Peter and John straight into the temple. He had been restored, not just to health but also to community. Rather than being on the outside, looking in at the life of God's people, he has now been brought inside, where he joins them in praising God.

Peter and John's Spirit-guided response to this man was a reflection of, and a participation in, the ongoing ministry of Jesus himself, through the early church. Peter and John could have walked past the man, paying him no attention. After all, they had to get to church. Or they could have just viewed the man as an interruption, someone who was interfering with their carefully planned daily routine. But no, Peter and John responded to it as a unique and unrepeatable opportunity for gospel ministry. Over and over, the Scriptures tell us stories about God working through such unexpected encounters. Follow the Gospel accounts of Jesus' own earthly ministry, and you will begin to see that a major portion of his kingdom mission took place while he was en route to somewhere else to help someone else. As one person has noted, "It is fair to say that his ministry was largely a response to interruptions."⁴

Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest whose life and writings continue to shape the practice of ministry. Shortly before his death, Nouwen wrote about an experienced professor he met during a visit to the University of Notre Dame. As they strolled across the campus, the professor, who had spent most of his life there, said in a melancholy voice: "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work."⁵

Being a Spirit-led church means that in our lives, individually and together, we need to be alert and discerning about how Christ is bringing us into contact with others, day in and day out, so that we can be witnesses to his grace, and instruments of his saving, life-giving power. In his book *Life Together*, pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us not to assume that our schedule is our own to manage. Rather, we must allow it to be arranged by God. He says, "We must be ready to allow ourselves to be interrupted by God. God will be constantly crossing our paths and canceling our plans by sending us people with claims and petitions."⁶ So now, as we near the conclusion of our service, the end of another "sweet hour of prayer," prepare to go forth into God's world, empowered by the Spirit and led by the Spirit in the paths you take, the people you meet, and the ministry you offer them.

¹ William H. Willimon, *Acts*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) n.p.

² John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 91.

³ Lance Ford and Brad Briscoe, *Next Door As It Is in Heaven* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016) 76.

⁴ Blaine Smith, "Handling Life's Interruptions: Expecting the Best from the Unexpected." <<http://nehemiah.gospelcom.net/interru3.htm>>.

⁵ This story is quoted by David Busic, in "Interruptions." <<http://www.nazarenepastor.org/busic.html>>.

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954) 99.