

# Generosity—Giving our Best

Acts 2:24-3:10

Summer Series on Acts Week 3

June 23, 2019

Gathering for prayer three times a day is still an important custom in Judaism, but at the time Acts was written, this was an especially important part of Jewish religious life. Morning, afternoon, and evening, Jewish men made their way to the Temple for a liturgy that included reading of Psalms, reciting various memorized prayers, and the Shema. Shema means listen or hear, and it's a little like the Lord's Prayer for Christians—it's so important, every Jewish child memorizes it at a pretty young age. It comes from Deuteronomy 6, just a few paragraphs after the Ten Commandments, and it is a summary of the Jewish faith. "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength."

Peter and John were on their way to prayer when they met this lame man. They were on their way to something important. They had a meeting to attend. Prayer couldn't start until there was a minyan—at least ten men. Now, in Jerusalem at that time it was not going to be difficult to get a minyan. But Peter and John had a schedule, a mission, an obligation to do what all good Jewish men would do.

But Peter and John were not just Jews. They were disciples of Jesus. During Jesus' ministry, when he was questioned about which of the laws in Judaism were most important, they heard him say, the most important, was the Shema. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." But then he went on to say, the second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus was making the point that love of neighbor is what happens when we truly Love God.

Luke writes that Peter and John took the time to "look intently at the man". They recognized that the call to compassion took precedence over the call to prayer—or perhaps, as Jesus seems to teach us, the call to compassion is the natural response to a life of prayer. Peter and John recognized that while it's important to get to church—in this case the temple—on time, their true mission, their true obligation, was to love their neighbor as their selves.

If you live in a parsonage, you frequently experience tension around the issue of loving others versus fulfilling obligations. For instance, last Saturday, while I was at Annual Conference, Phil was getting ready to leave for a meeting. He is the board president of a non-profit called Artos, which provides support to clergy spouses. He was taking our dog out for a quick walk before he left, when he saw a man in the church parking lot who needed help. Phil didn't want to be late for his meeting—but he didn't want to ignore someone in distress. So Phil took the dog home, drove to the gas station with the man following behind, and filled up his gas tank for him.

Pastors and their families get a lot more requests for help than most church members realize. We do not always say yes. There are people who see churches as their personal ATM machines, and that's not right. On the other hand, compassion and mercy are two of our core values. If for some reason I feel my gut is telling me not to help, I always feel dis-ease about that. But most of the time when I do help, I am left wondering about that, too. It is a tricky situation.

But in the first days of the Christian church, helping others wasn't tricky at all. Luke records how, in the very beginning of the Christian church, there was a remarkable level of sharing. People sold their possessions and shared the wealth. Church historians are quick to point out that this practice has been tried other places, and almost always, like in Acts, it is short lived. It is not sustainable, but this description of the early church gives us a picture of God's ultimate will for humankind. One day everyone will have all that they need! This description of the early church also gives us a glimpse into the Kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, there is no such things as landlord and tenant; no farm owners versus sharecroppers. Everyone is equally able to participate in, and enjoy the benefits, of the Kingdom of God!

Peter and John, on their way to fulfill a religious obligation—stopped to help someone. They did not have any silver or gold, and they did not apologize for that. After all, silver and gold would only help the lame man for a limited amount of time. Instead, of giving him a temporary gift, they gave him an eternal one! They gave him a share in the Kingdom of God!

I wonder, would things have been different if Peter and John had some money with them that day? Would they have just reached into their wallets, and given the man \$20, and continued about their business? Perhaps that would have been better than not giving him anything. But I doubt a story like that would have made it into Luke's writing. What was so amazing about this story was Peter and John gave something far more precious than silver or gold. They gave him healing—and not just in his body. They gave him healing in his soul. For the first time in his whole life, the lame man was able to enter the Temple and worship! Before he this, he was considered unclean because of his infirmity. He was never able to attend public worship. Peter and John healed the man's body, they healed his soul, they shared with the man the very best thing they could.

During Advent, we often sing “Emmanuel, Emmanuel, they call his name, Emmanuel. God with us, revealed in us, his name is called, Emmanuel.” Peter and John were on their way to afternoon prayers, which always included recitations about God's presence, God's provision, and God's mercy. Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. The Lord is real. The Lord is here. The Lord has one singular aim: to love the world into abundant life. I think that's what these somewhat extreme stories in the book of Acts are all about—offering proof that God is with us and it at work for good! The first Christians sold their possessions and held everything in common—proof that God was with them and was changing their priorities. Luke wrote that they were all in one accord. And we're not talking Honda Accord, although there is an old joke about that being the Christian's favorite car. They were in one accord, united, like-minded. Their unity was proof that God

is with us and is at work for good. And now, Peter and John offered healing to the lame man. True discipleship means using all we have to reveal the fact that God is with us.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was famous for giving all the money in his wallet to help poor people. But when his wallet was empty, he didn't just shrug his shoulders and say, "Sorry, I can't help you!" He wrote in his journal, and several other sources back this up, that Wesley would go door to door, asking for help for this stranger in need! Like Peter and John, Wesley could honestly say, silver and gold have I none. But what I do have, I will give you. And what Wesley had was an unshakable conviction that every person matters to God, and if one person suffers, we all suffer. Wesley used his conviction, and dogged determination, went door to door on behalf of someone else in need. Wesley didn't have much cash. But he had commitment. He had chutzpah! By using what he had, he revealed God's relentless love for all persons.

This information about John Wesley is impressive, but there are problems with this all-out giving. It makes family life pretty impossible! John Wesley was a notorious champion for the poor, but he also had a very unhappy marriage. He himself suffered as a child because his father, an Anglican priest, was frequently in debtors' prison because he was so generous to others he couldn't pay his own bills. It is impossible to give away all we have, and be faithful to our families. Most of us, we are going to feel that tension between wanting to be generous with strangers while prioritizing the needs of our primary dependents. I do not believe Jesus calls every person to take a vow of poverty. Nor do I think we are expected to just hand someone \$20 because they ask for it. But Jesus does call all of us to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can expect that our love for God will require us to show that love to others in ways that are sacrificial and expensive.

And the first step toward love involves seeing. Making eye contact. Luke records that "Peter looked straight at" the lame man, and so did John. They did not walk on by, but they stopped and looked. They did not jump to conclusions, they had him look at them, too, and made a connection. They didn't just throw money at him and wash their hands of the situation. They took an active interest in his reality, and responded with the best help they could give.

Our scripture lesson today has me wondering how often we do that. The word disciple means "learner". One way we continue to learn more from Jesus is to learn more about others. Looking at the situation as clearly as you possibly can. That is the only way to know how to respond lovingly. Co-dependence is not love. Propping up unhealthy behavior is not kind. Loving our neighbors as ourselves requires looking with discernment as well as grace. It requires power from the Holy Spirit. Peter and John were on their way to pray, but when the Holy Spirit prompted them to stop and look, they did. And when the Holy Spirit prompted them to give, they did. I hope this story will encourage us to become more like Peter and John—people who are in tune to the nuances of the Spirit's movement in us.

But I also hope this story will help us become more like the lame man. We can see how the Holy Spirit was working in his life for some time. His friends brought him to the temple gates every day. But we could also say that was prevenient grace, getting him to the place

where he would be able to receive Christ for himself. Then, at the right moment, the Holy Spirit healed him. It wasn't Peter and John who instantly made the lame man's feet and ankles strong. It was God. It was God who transformed the lame man from only being able to go where others took him, to now having the agency to go wherever God wanted him to go.

And God wants to work that same transformation in us. The power of God is at work in each us of, helping us to become martyrs and witnesses—people who are willing to stand alone if need be as prophets and pioneers for justice and peace. We all have some infirmities in us. We all need our feet and ankles strengthened so we can stand on the truth, and go to the places Jesus needs us to go.

Tonight at Vacation Bible School, our children will be learning about Jesus, the ultimate super hero. But they will also be learning they as Christians, little Christs, they can be heroes for God, too. God's heroes have heart, strength, courage and wisdom. May the power of the Holy Spirit come upon us and give is the ability to attend to, and respond to, the world's needs, in the best ways. Amen.