

Third Sunday of Easter

April 15th, 2018

By Thomas L. Truby

Acts 3:12-19

We Have to Recognize “Who Done It”

On the cross God glorified Jesus, revealed him for who he is, set up his role in history, and turned human culture on its ear by subtly revealing the mechanism that has entangled us always and through which we condemn ourselves to death. Jesus accomplished this on Easter when he used his own death and God’s glorifying resurrection to reveal what we do to each other and to empower us to escape the desert of our own making.

In Acts the people, not recognizing who Jesus was on the stage of history, think that Peter and John have healed a lame beggar who blocked their way up the temple steps as they go to pray. Everyone who prayed daily had seen the beggar there for years. His beseeching eyes had accused them of their good fortune and their disinterest in sharing it with him.

It just happened that Peter and John were going up to the temple to pray when the beggar, paralyzed from birth, was carried in and left at his usual place. “When he saw Peter and John about to enter into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John.”

I wonder what was going through their minds. Were they thinking of themselves as the new temple, the new way by which God’s love gets communicated to God’s creation. Hadn’t Jesus breathed on them, sending his Spirit into his followers? Maybe I am getting the theology of the Gospel of John confused with the theology of the Gospel of St. Luke but it’s worth thinking about.

This has been a week full of brokenness and healing for us. On Tuesday Laura entered Willamette Falls Hospital where she got a total hip replacement on her right leg. People were so kind and cheerful. Each person went out of their way to serve the newly vulnerable and the profoundly handicapped. They worked together as a team, each deferring to the other according to their specialty and all deferring to the doctor, whose praise they sang as he provided the overall direction for the whole healing enterprise. I saw how Jesus wants us to work together under his leadership as good, patient-centered care was modeled in front of me. The result of their working together was healing for the lame and for the staff, a sense of personal worth and participation in a cause bigger than themselves.

When Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, this, in part, is what he means. It is a spirit of cooperation for the benefit of all, where rivalry is anticipated and managed, authority becomes a tool of service and not abused, and where all value a culture of respect and professionalism

they mutually create. This new quality of relationship is what Peter and John, having been breathed upon by Jesus and imbued with the Holy Spirit, have to offer the cripple and the world that supports him.

“Peter looked at him intently, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” (Usually we don’t want beggars looking at us. It makes us feel guilty for not giving.) And the beggar fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.”

The gospel is almost always bait and switch. We think we are going to receive the one thing we think we want and instead we are given another, and it is something of far greater worth than we could imagine. There is a shift in perspective that moves from a handout that keeps us broken to something so incredible it seems out of the realm of possibility. The center of the shift is relational where our small world suddenly opens up with all kinds of new relational possibilities.

“Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’ Peter is clear that he didn’t do this by his own power. This was done in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. This is power that comes from the lowest place. Not Rome, not Jerusalem—Nazareth, that humble little village between Oregon City and Molalla, so to speak.

Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. It’s like his body had been strengthened with a titanium and plastic insert.

“Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.” Can you see them; this new community of Jesus followers, walking into the temple together, arms linked, shoulder to shoulder, all walking, equals before God, full of gratitude and astounded by what had just happened. When Jesus said he had breathed his own spirit into them, he really had. Now John and Peter were themselves doing what Jesus had done.

“All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.” “While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s Portico, utterly astonished.” It’s like a scene from the Wizard of Oz; the tin man, the bashful lion and little Dorothy stand in the temple as the crowds gather around them.

Clearly the people thought that Peter and John had just performed a miracle but the disciples knew they hadn’t. This was something Jesus of Nazareth had done, not them.

Peter decides to set the record straight and this is where the liturgist began with today's New Testament lesson. "When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, 'You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him.'" Do you see what Peter is doing? He is telling them that God glorified Jesus, and the healing of the beggar shows you the truth of this. While God glorified Jesus you made sure that Jesus was condemned though Pilate was going to release him.

"You rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses." This is one of those sections of the Bible that I believe literally. The human species rejected God's Son and saw to it that God's son was murdered. Can you imagine an indictment harder to hear than this? Peter is saying all of us are guilty of murder and it is a murder of the highest order.

This is a charge humans have always resisted and yet without acknowledging the truth of this, we close the door to our own awareness of God's forgiveness and mercy. We can't see his essential non-violence. We have to acknowledge our guilt and violence before we can appreciate and value our forgiveness and allow it to change us.

For this reason Peter, filled with Jesus' breath of life, continues, "And now, friends, (he calls them friends because they have been forgiven even after participating in his murder), and now friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers." Even the Roman rulers were acting in ignorance and have been forgiven. Since Girard's writing, I think we can better understand how that works.

God has been faithful through the suffering of his Messiah rather than through "might makes right", and through intimidation, threats and fears of retaliation. Now his suffering and forgiveness win us over.

So where are we now? What should we do? "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that he may send the Messiah, appointed for you, that is, Jesus." Amen.