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“Universal Restoration”

Part II of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”

Acts 3:1-26

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Acts 3:1-26 (NRSV)

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. ²And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' ⁵And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But 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.' ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰and 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.

¹¹ While he clung to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's Portico, utterly astonished. ¹²When 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? ¹³The 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. ¹⁴But you rejected



the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you,¹⁵ and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.¹⁶ And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

¹⁷ ‘And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer.

¹⁹Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰so 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, ²¹who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets. ²²Moses said, “The Lord your God will raise up for you from your own people a prophet like me. You must listen to whatever he tells you. ²³And it will be that everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be utterly rooted out from the people.” ²⁴And all the prophets, as many as have spoken, from Samuel and those after him, also predicted these days. ²⁵You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, “And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” ²⁶When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you, to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.’

Sermon:

Willie James Jennings writes, “The gate of the temple becomes the entrance to a new future.”ⁱ As Peter and John enter the temple through the gate called Beautiful, they see a man lying at the door of God’s house. There is nothing unusual about this scene. The faithful are following a life-giving tradition of prayer, worship, and almsgiving. And a man “lame from birth” has been carried to his usual spot at the temple’s gate. This man came again and again, yet he never experienced God’s healing power before that day.

The man follows his usual pattern to request alms. It’s not hard for us to imagine. His voice drowned out by the sound of feet moving back and forth over the threshold, people coming and going about the business of rituals symbolic of restoration. As this man follows his desperate pattern of begging, it is interrupted by Peter. “Look at us,” he says. The men lock eyes. I imagine the man expected the usual economic exchange, a transaction between the haves and the have-nots. But this wasn’t to be the usual exchange. “Look at us,” Peter says. And at once, we remember the ways Jesus saw. We remember the way he saw the blind beggar, Zacchaeus up in the tree, the ways he saw the children, the widows, and the outcast. “Look at us,” Peter says, and we know that here the poor and needy will not be overlooked. Here, at the beginning of the post-Pentecost church, people will be seen fully, strongly, clearly.ⁱⁱ

“There is silver and there is gold, the gifts of the Caesars of this world. Then there are the gifts of God. Both of these things carry power and can lead to worship.”ⁱⁱⁱ Peter has no riches to give the man, but he has something else to offer. The claim of God. And in the name of Jesus the man is raised from his place on the ground onto two strong, firm feet for the first time in his life.



No wonder the people stare. Many of them must have known this disabled man their whole lives. And here, for the first time, they see him anew.

Since the start of this pandemic, it has been fairly easy for my perspective to become rather myopic. Like many of you, when this whole thing started, my singular concern was for my family to be safe and healthy. It was too much for me mentally or emotionally to exert energy beyond what I had to do to keep a household well and accomplish the work I get paid to do. But as time has gone by, I am feeling the tug of the Spirit to lift my eyes and pay closer attention to the world beyond my immediate sphere. Truthfully, I don't have to look far to see what I wish I could unsee.

“Look at us,” Peter said.

Now, there is nothing wrong with wanting to care for those you love. In fact, I think that's one of the first ways we can help usher in Christ's Kingdom now. And there certainly are times when your own mental or physical health requires that you focus on yourself for a while. But what I was beginning to miss—what I was unwilling to see—were those crying out from the gate, the threshold, the margins.

So, I am convicted by this scene.

As the crowd begins to gather, Peter begins to speak. Peter, John, and the healed man stand together, each of them miracles. The healed one because of what God has done for him; Peter and John because they now live on the other side of the journey of Jesus as his true witnesses.

Peter offers words again to guide their sight. “Why do you stare at us?” Peter asks. “We aren't the miracle workers here, but the God of Abraham and your ancestors, who sent his servant Jesus—that is the One responsible.” No one is healed by the power of holiness of witness, but only through Jesus of Nazareth.

We are reminded that Peter is speaking to an in-house crowd, his own people, the children of Israel. Peter is speaking to his Jewish brothers and sisters, but in reading this account, we know the Spirit pulls us into that very same congregation. What he speaks captures a reality for us all.

Peter tells a story about the weaknesses of many, the ease with which a crowd can be deceived and go against their own well-being. If the many can be deceived—and we know that can happen—what must it be like for them to see their own deception for the first time? Peter is in the painful position of seeing and knowing what others don't yet fully see. That's a difficult place to be. How many intellectuals, artists, activists, scientists, or sages have found themselves in this exact position, wishing for a wiser crowd to will and do the common good? Such seers can be tormented by their knowledge.

Peter and John carry the memory of a crowd that called for Jesus' death. Here they stand with conviction, but the point of this speech is not the actions of many, but the actions of One.



(Here's where I want to just read you the whole chapter out of Willie James Jennings' commentary, because it is that good—but I'll hold back and give you just a few key lines from the book...)

The man healed is now a sign of the man resurrected from the dead, the author of life itself. Now the actions of the One confront the wayward propensities of the many. If peoples are often seduced by the power of violence and take up the weapons of death, here is Jesus the Messiah who has overcome the effects of violence and the pull of death. If peoples are prone to choose against their own wellbeing and life, here is the Messiah who heals, restores, and gives life. We need not be mystified by the crowd or frustrated by their failures to act for the common good; Jesus has acted for them and offers his body as a way out and a way to be together.^{iv}

Peter is shifting the focus of the crowd directly onto Jesus. All of Israel's prophets, Peter says, point to Jesus. All of Israel's history, Peter explains, points to Jesus. And then, Peter makes his most outrageous presumption yet—Jesus has begun the “universal restoration” (literally, in Greek: “the restoration of all people” or “the restoration of all things”).^v

This is one of the places where I wish Acts were a little longer. If only Peter added a few more lines to elaborate. Who knows what the heck Peter really meant? Is he talking about the end times? Maybe. He's definitely talking about a restoration far more real than the symbolic ones taking place inside the temple. He refers to the prophets, so presumably some of the prophets' most grandiose hopes are in view here. Imagine the visions the prophets tried to convey. Visions of all people enjoying everlasting security. Visions of shalom, a situation of peace, health, and abundance established by God. Peter also mentioned the children of Abraham who will provide a blessing to all the world's families. Whatever he's describing, it is clear that “universal restoration” will include more than Jews alone. For God remembers every name in every nation.

We all know what it's like to be part of a group. We are, most of us, members of the same church after all. Many of us share common beliefs, commitments, and values. We are part of an in-group. But I bet that most of us have also experienced being part of the out-group.

For Peter's gathered crowd, it is clear and simple to see who is “in” and who is “out.” What Peter is preaching, and what he himself doesn't yet fully understand (at least until later in Acts), is that in Jesus Christ, God is widening the “in” crowd significantly. For generations, God's people have gone about the symbolic acts of restoration, making sacrifices, giving alms, doing the rituals—but what Jesus has ushered in is true restoration—for all people. It is a vision far broader than we can imagine.

It is not lost on me that the healing in our passage takes place outside the temple.

Who are those “outside” people today? Who are we unable to see? Where have we chosen the easy route of staying detached, ignoring the need, or narrowing our focus?

Like many of you, I worry about our neighbors living on the edge of poverty, especially right now. I care about a living wage, and I know our healthcare system is broken. Recently, I learned



that a friend was diagnosed with a chronic illness. She lives on the cusp of poverty—yet she makes too much money to qualify for Medicaid, and not enough money to afford her own health insurance. I'd heard stories like this before, but until I knew someone personally, I hadn't really seen the problem.

Earlier this summer, I tried to help a woman navigate housing before she could be released for parole. I called everyone I could think of, but without family connections (her parents have died since her incarceration, and what family's still living have caused her abuse and trauma, and it's unsafe for her to resume connection with them)—so without family connections, and a place to welcome her in, she was denied parole for a third time and is seemingly stuck in this never-ending cycle.

I've read about things like this before, but until I made the phone calls that were never returned or got half answers that only sent me in circles, I hadn't really seen how hopeless these situations could be.

I don't have to tell you it is easy to feel discouraged. The weaknesses of our systems and the movement of the many make me worried. It feels like we're headed in the wrong direction, and it can leave me feeling scared.

But then, Peter says, God's Spirit moves. In Acts, it sounds like a mighty wind, it looks like tongues of fire, it shakes the earth with a rumble. Today, it can feel like a nudge, it can work like a change in perspective, it can whisper hope where we feel the least bit hopeful.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is remembered for the beautiful theological quote, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." King was actually paraphrasing a portion of a sermon delivered in 1853 by the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker. In that sermon, Parker said, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice."^{vi}

King's paraphrase is a much stronger statement. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Parker's is a bit more uncertain. For him, there is no guarantee that he sees clearly, that the moral universe is doing as he wishes. But this vantage point requires no less a strong faith than King's. It requires vision and the work of his own conscience, his own actions, in order for justice to be achieved.

Peter reminds us that God has already put into motion a restoration that will encompass it all. Every witness to Jesus now has the possibility of drawing their stories and histories to Jesus as their meaning, their fulfillment, and their end. He is the One who can take hold of the pain, the horror, the utter exhaustion we feel and weave our stories together with the stories of others and give all people a new sight of a new creation and life eternal. This is the spilling over of the



restoration of Israel and the explosion beyond any borders of expectation. Thanks to the boundary breaking work of the Spirit, all peoples may have a new future in Jesus and a new story to tell. Because of the Spirit, we have hope. We need not follow the way of the many, but the way of the One. May we do our part to seek and work for the peace and justice he has ushered in.

ⁱ Willie James Jennings, *Belief: Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p. 40.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 41.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 42.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 43.

^v Matthew Skinner, *Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), p. 33.

^{vi} Mychal Denzel Smith, "The Truth About 'The Arc Of The Moral Universe'," January 18, 2018 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_n_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4

