

Sermon Text For August 26, 2018

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Song of Solomon 8:6-7, Acts 3:1-10

“What do you really need?”

We start a new chapter in Acts today. It is a new chapter in a number of different ways. Over the past few weeks we saw the early church in its first chapter taking steps to become a more mature church: it gathered, it gave, and it grew. Today we see it going, kind of the 4th G, going out into the world and putting into practice what it had learned. Not drawing into themselves and remaining a closed community, but reaching out.

A sign of a mature church is knowing the difference between what it needs and what it wants. We need to have officers fill our nominating committee slates. We need men and women who are willing to sacrifice time and effort for the good of this church, it is what makes a church a church. We could spend hours listing what might be fun for the church to have and the money needed to buy it. But the maturity and the discernment comes when the question is asked: what do you really need?

Today, Peter and John, two of Jesus’ original disciples, come face to face with a man, a beggar who asks for something he wants. They give him what he needs. Our lesson today is to try to identify as people, as individual families, what we really need and then again as a church what are our needs truly are.

READ SCRIPTURE

In these first two chapters in Acts we are looking at what are some of the marks of a mature Christian and also a mature church and how can we move closer to that ideal.

We have talked about how mature Christians are excited to reach others with the love of Christ and to bring others into a loving and caring community. Today, for the first time, we look at the disciples as they go outside of the walls of their own community and literally reach one person for Jesus Christ and give him what he needs in order to be a part of this loving community. Keep in mind this happens after more than 3,000 people have come to know Jesus and all of these people are sharing all things in common. They sold all their goods and distributed them among themselves as they needed in an incredible social construct. What a concept, I’m not sure in this 21st century anyone would call that Christian, but it is exactly what Christ wanted them to do. The more mature we are, the closer we get to that ideal.

Let's put this Scripture into context again. Every single day at 3 in the afternoon there was a sacrifice performed at the temple followed by a time of prayer. We read in chapter 2 that the disciples would gather for prayer every single day at the temple and John and Peter were doing just that on this day, gathering at the temple for prayer. You need to know that it wasn't easy to get into the temple because there were a series of gates and courtyards around the temple that you had to go through in order to get to the actual temple.

There was a court of the gentiles, then the women had a court. This Scripture speaks about a beautiful gate which led to the temple. Every single day the Jews would come and gather and a group would bring this 40 year old man, we know that from Acts 4:22, born crippled right in front of the beautiful gate so he could beg from all those going in. This is still true today in most countries. Beggars congregate at the steps of churches, especially on Sunday to ask for donations.

I have been all over the world and seen all sorts of situations where beggars ask for money. In Nicaragua I didn't see any adults but kids would flock around buses asking and begging for money, how can you say no to a child. In Russia around the steps of the orthodox churches when it is cold and all you see is a pile of clothing and dish on the ground and you know there is someone under all that stuff.

In New York where they are as aggressive as you can find anywhere in the world, they come up to you and make you make eye contact with them and then just about demand that you give something. But in Italy, the saddest, most pitiful that I have ever seen was a woman standing outside of a church, gnarled and bent over, not able to look at you if she could, but with her hand out. It reminds me of the woman in Luke 13, remember Luke also wrote Acts, who was bent over for 18 years and was set free by Jesus who touched her and allowed her to have a new life. She sprang up and rejoiced.

This was the usual pose of the beggar, the head down and the arm uplifted as a sign of humility. This man was here probably for the last 20, 30 years, everyone knew him and recognized him. Now remember, as a cripple he was not allowed to even enter the temple, this is important. That was a Jewish law that only healthy male Jews could enter. Everyone helped him out every now and then. There are people close to us, in our own community, that are in dire need, and we know some of them, some of us know some of them. We had one of our preschool moms stop by the other week and ask for

food from our food bank. She had some middle school kids and they attended an event. We know them, we interact with them, they are one of us..., or at least they should be.

This was no different. In verse 3 we see him ask Peter and John for alms, for an offering, can you spare a dime. What did the last verses in chapter 2 tell us about Peter and John and the earliest Christian community? They had all things in common, so they probably didn't even have a dime. In fact, they say as much a couple of verses down the line. They knew this guy, they had seen him for the last 20 years or more. But in a sense, maybe it was the first time that they were actually seeing him. They were now different people, the Holy spirit had invaded their lives and they belonged to Jesus. They saw him. Saw his need, they knew he could do better.

They say to him: Look at us. It is easier to walk past and ignore the one in need when you don't actually look at them, but they say to him: look at us. He did, and when he did he knew, he just knew he was going to get something because it says: he looked at them, vs. 5, expecting to receive something from them. He got something alright, but it wasn't at all what he expected. He wanted money, they gave him legs.

This vs. 6 is a powerful verse for all of us because they gave him what they had: quote, we don't have silver or gold etc. Now whether they had given their money away or left their wallet at home, they don't have a dime but they give him something more precious and much more life-changing. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter and John had seen this man, perhaps for the first time. With the eyes of faith, they believed that Jesus could do the unbelievable for him. With words of faith, they spoke words of healing and power, that had a result because they knew what he needed.

So many of us in this culture truly believe that our greatest problem is that we do not have enough money, or time, or opportunities, or friends, or a spouse, so many things that if we just had it then we could do what we really ought to do. Song of Solomon says people would be scorned if they traded love for money, and probably for any of those things as well, but, I wonder. I use this Scripture often in weddings. But love is probably the most disposable commodity in our culture and in our society. It is taken and given away so freely and without a second thought. Peter and John are able to see through this man's desire for money and give him what he really needed, new legs and new hope.

I am convinced that at the root of a financial issue is someone who has misidentified their true needs. At the root of someone who is dissatisfied with life, is looking for the wrong thing. What are we praying for? For money to make ends meet, or

wisdom so that our decision about people, about choices, about a whole gamut of situations in our life will be resolved and so in that way also resolve the issues that seem to assail us. This man was given new legs so he could start his life over again. He may not have made as much money as he did when he was begging but he had a life that was freed.

The same that goes for individuals also goes for churches. If we are bent over and looking at ourselves then our perceived needs are going to be about us. But when we look up and away from worrying about finances, about our time, about our families, about our upwardly mobile lifestyles, then our ability to serve others increases and our true needs are met.

So what is it that we need? It is absolutely imperative that a mature Christian and a mature church be able to distinguish between what we need and what we want.

Well, what happened next? They reach down, pick him up, and put him on his feet. The Christian community needs to do that at times. He is strengthened. Then look at vs. 8. He stands, walks, and begins leaping and bounding around the temple. Can you imagine it? For the first time in his life he is able to worship in the temple and this was all a result of Jesus Christ.

We worship for the first time when we come into contact with the power and the presence of the one who gives us all that we need. Everyone saw it. Everyone was amazed. Every single person there was impacted by these two disciples who saw a man and looked and identified what he needed, the saving and healing power of Jesus Christ. You know, either the community is able to point to signs of healing power at work in the world because of what has happened in Christ or the community is without evidence for its claim.

What people really need is Jesus Christ, look around you and prove it to those around you. This week I want to encourage you all as individuals, as families, to sit down and look at how your true needs are being met. You will be amazed as you list what you have and what blessings you have been provided. What more do you need. Then ask the question in what way is Christ a part of my needs, do I feel as if I need Christ as much as I feel that I need one of those things on that list. If the answer is yes then work just as hard to make Christ a part of your life as you work to make one of those things on your list achievable.