

Third Sunday of Easter:
Series Title: “Counter-Cultural Community”
19 April 2015
FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011
“Counter-Cultural Community”
Preaching Text: Acts 3:12-19

There’s an empty spot I’ve always had inside me.
I tried to fill it with family, religion, community service, but those were dead ends!
I think this chair is the answer
(Matt Groening, Cartoonist who created The Simpsons).

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May we hear the day’s lesson:

12 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? 13 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. 14 But 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. 18 In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. 19 Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” (Acts 3:12-19).

In this age of a million choices, we are the remnant, the sometimes faithful, sometimes unfaithful family of a difficult and glorious God, called to seek and proclaim God’s presence in a disillusioned world. It is a world that claims to have left us behind, along with dragons and maps of a flat earth, but meanwhile the human heart continues to hunt its true home. Today it is crystals and past-life readings; tomorrow it may be travel to Mars. Ours is a restless and impatient race, known for abandoning our saviors and quickly as we elect them for not saving us soon or well or often enough.

Those of us who call ourselves Christian belong to that race. We are fickle and flawed, but we are more than that because we believe in a God who believes in us. God looks at us and sees the best: sees beloved children, sees likely allies, sees able partners in the ongoing work of creation. In faith, we set out to see the same things in ourselves and to live into them, trusting God’s vision of us more than we trust our own. This is the work of the church, not only for our own members but the whole world, work that is more important now than it has ever been, and more difficult (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, Boston, 1993, pp. 11-12).

Our text this morning comes on the heels of “the miraculous healing of a crippled beggar” as the text puts it. Today we might call the person healed as “one with a handicapping condition and economically deprived.” Either way, it was a moment of high drama in Acts. After the healing, with the man clinging to Peter and John, “all the people ran together to them in the portico called Solomon’s Portico, utterly astonished (Acts 3:11). It is at this point Peter begins his speech.

In the speech or sermon of Peter’s there are two basic emphases. Similar to Peter’s speech/sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2, this speech begins by addressing a misunderstanding. The first emphasis has to do with those people who listen to Peter and their guilt over the rejection of Jesus. Several of the phrases pile up as an indictment of the people:

- Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate
- you rejected the Holy and Righteous One
- you killed the Author of life

Of course, far too much Christian preaching and dogma/doctrine focuses, in my judgment, on people’s failings, as if these failings would be difficult to find and point out. Yet, it is important to let Peter’s other emphasis shine through. Peter is not so much interested, I think, in assigning blame to the conditions adjacent to Jesus’ death. Rather, Peter reveals how God works for good in situations of apparent evil. Peter’s elevation of God and God’s grace is seen when Peter uses these phrases:

- The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus
- [this Jesus] whom God raised from the dead
- the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health
- God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets
- turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out

In our world today it is easy enough to assign blame and bow to the legalistic, rule-

making, spirit of our age. If we make enough laws and punish enough people, this thinking goes, then we will fix our society and world. Yet, Peter wanted his fellow Israelites to know that even in their ignorance and sin, God's will and grace can and does prevail. It is the rule of grace that overcomes the world's sin and ignorance. Perhaps, this is a gospel emphasis we would all do well to remember—and remember often. I like Acts 4:33: “With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all”

During the War Between the States, a young teenage boy enlisted to be a soldier for the Union army. But he was not ready. He was much too young, and when the time came for his first encounter with the enemy, he became terrified and ran away. He was caught, arrested, judged guilty of desertion and sentenced to be shot by a firing squad. His parents wrote a letter to President Abraham Lincoln, pleading for mercy, pleading for a pardon for their young son. Touched by their letter, President Lincoln called for the facts and when he realized the situation, he overrode the death sentence and granted the teenager a full presidential pardon. In his official statement explaining his action, Mr. Lincoln wrote these words: “Over the years . . . I have observed that it does not do a boy much good to shoot him” (James Moore, *When All Else Fails . . . Read the Instructions*, Dimensions for Living, Nashville, 1993, p. 55).

God's mercy and compassion is what Peter's speech is all about. If we had more people who understood the Christian faith as an opportunity to be more Christ-like, and to suffer with others in their misfortune, I believe we would live in a world much closer to the way God intended it. To do this—to live in this compassionate way—goes against the grain of every human instinct. For this reason, Christians must rely on God's grace, “for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey,” as the old hymn, *Trust and Obey*, (p. 467, UM Hymnal) puts it.”

When I first became a Christian and as a much younger person, I thought that where Christ is then there is no misery. But now, as I hope I am maturing as a follower of Jesus, I

recognize that wherever there is misery, then there Christ is.

Leslie Weatherhead reminds us that the forgiveness of sins is the most therapeutic idea in the world. If you really believe that God has forgiven you, then the burden of guilt and the fear at the heart of your misery will disappear. Weatherhead concludes that “if this great idea is really received by the mind, not only by the intellect, but by the emotions as well, then it is like the dawn breaking after a long night of black torture” (*Psychology, Religion, and Healing*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951, p. 334—As related in John Stroman’s, *Pray In This Way: Sermons on the Lord’s Prayer*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1995, pp. 64-65).

Our task is to understand the nature of human weakness and pray to God to use the power of God’s grace in our life to use Christ and his example and power in our daily walk of faith. It is the most simple—and difficult—and blessed—thing we will ever do! Amen.

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