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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
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Texts: Numbers 21:4-9, Acts 3:1-10

## Faith Healing

### *Introduction to Scripture*

We pick up our reading in the Book of Acts in the third chapter. We have heard about Pentecost, when the Spirit energized the initial band of Jesus' followers after his ascension, what we sometimes call the birthday of the church. We have seen their numbers grow exponentially in response to Peter's preaching. We have learned how these first Christians lived together in community, pooling their resources, worshiping in the temple, studying the apostles' teaching, and breaking bread. We come now to a story about two of the Apostles, Peter and John. Listen for God's word: *Acts 3:1-10*.

### *Sermon*

I was serving as a student chaplain for the summer at NC Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill. I got a call to the Emergency Room where I met with a very anxious young resident who requested a chaplain. He said that a 29 year old woman had been admitted with kidney failure. It seems she had gone off dialysis after watching Miss America's testimony on Rex Humbard's t.v. show. On the evangelist's show, Miss America told how one leg was shorter than the other due to a serious car accident. However, while attending a faith healing seminar, God had caused her leg to grow two inches in a matter of seconds. Rex Humbard then invited those in the viewing audience with ailments to put their hands on their t.v. screens and pray with him for healing. Egged on by her parents, the young woman now in the E.R. believed that the power of prayer had cured her kidney disease, just as it had Miss America's limp. Only, of course, it hadn't.

Doubtless we all have prayed for cures that never came. And yet, sometimes they do. Sometimes it's through modern medicine and the skill of medical practitioners. And sometimes, rarely, miraculously they come more directly. One of our members recently sat in my office and told me the amazing tale of being healed of debilitating migraines. It wasn't through a t.v. evangelist or a pilgrimage to Lourdes, France. It was in a very Presbyterian "Service of Wholeness," straight out of the *Book of Common Worship*, offered by her congregation one Lent. When the ministers invited congregants who wanted to be prayed for with the laying on of hands to come forward, this member felt that headaches paled in seriousness next to cancer and Parkinson's and decided to keep her seat. In spite of this, she said, the Holy Spirit impelled her forward. When the pastor and associate pastor's hands encompassed her head, she felt an indescribable power and warmth and lightness and healing. To this day, migraines no longer plague her.

I have no explanation as to why some prayers for healing are answered and others are

not. It's hard for me to stomach the idea that there is a divine reason behind the answered or unanswered pleas. Nevertheless, I do believe that wholeness is God's will. As I read the Bible it seems clear that healing, forgiveness, reconciliation, recovery, restoration are all God's will, God's desire, God's intent. Luke tells us that at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah and says that he came to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Story after story tells of his freeing those held in bondage by illness and disease. He heals the sick, the leprous, the paralyzed, the sightless, the demon-possessed, the hemorrhaging, the dying. Jesus is the Great Physician, healing many people in body, mind, and soul. The Good News which Jesus proclaimed is inextricably bound up with getting well.

And so, it's not surprising that when Luke pens his second volume, the Book of Acts, early on we come to a healing story. The apostles, Peter and John, are on their way to the temple. They are on their way to worship and pray. Their path takes them by a man who was born crippled. Unlike the priest and Levite in Jesus' famous parable, they do pass by on the other side. They do not avoid the man who needs help. When he cries for alms, they stop and pay attention to him. They have no money to offer him since they have given all their money to the community purse. So instead, Peter tells the cripple in the name of Jesus to stand up and walk. Peter then offers his hand. The man rises, walks, and soon is leaping about praising God.

Two things strike me about this encounter. The first is the emphasis Luke places on the act of seeing. He uses four different verbs to highlight this act. Luke writes:

First, the man *saw* Peter and John

In return Peter *looked intently* at him and said, "*Look* at us."

Then the man *fixed his attention* on them.

The second thing that strikes me is how the healing is depicted as purely a gift, even an unexpected gift. The man is hoping for charity, yes. That's all he has known his whole life. Fortunately, he has friends who daily carry him to a prime location to ask for donations. But that is all he is seeking: spare change, offerings of temple goers who will give out of duty, kindness, or guilt. To his utter surprise and joy, what he receives from the apostles is a gift far greater than he ever imagined possible.

Further, we are to understand that his healing is a divine gift. Gifts by definition are not earned or bought. This gift from God was not given because of the virtue of the apostles. Remember, not so very long ago, Peter was Jesus' denier-in-chief on the eve of his crucifixion. In the next part of the story, which we didn't read, Peter stands before the amazed crowd and tells them that it was not their own power or piety that made the man walk. And we can say that it wasn't the cripple's man faith, either, since he didn't even ask for healing. Nor was the healing thanks to the apostles' material resources, because they didn't have any. We conclude then that it was purely thanks to the power and grace of God that the man is no longer lame.

If we read this story as a story not just of the early church but a story about us, the current church, we do well to consider our two observations. First, we cannot avoid the people in need literally at our doorstep. We cannot retreat into our temples for prayer and worship and ignore the marginalized in our community. We must stop and see them. And they must see us. There is something very vulnerable about seeing another. The eyes are said to be the windows of the soul. When we truly look another person in the eyes, it puts us on level ground, so to speak. We behold them as a fellow human being, a sibling child of God, one created in the

divine image just like us. Looking honestly at each other can be a scary but necessary thing. It is an important part of the healing process.

Secondly, we must trust that the power for healing comes from beyond ourselves. It is not a matter of our goodness, our faith, our plans, and our resources. It is God's good gift, bestowed out of God's grace. When Peter says, "What I have I give you in the name of Jesus Christ," he is calling on the power of God.

Presbyterian pastor and author Joan Gray has a helpful image for a church which relies upon the power of God.<sup>i</sup> It's not a new image, but an ancient one: a sailboat. From earliest times, the church has been pictured as a boat, always a sailboat, often with a cross on its mast or sail. Sailboats are, of course, powered by the wind. The word *wind*—in both Hebrew and Greek—is the same word as *spirit*. To the early Christians, the church was a God-powered, God-led, God-resourced adventure. They depended on God's Spirit to provide what they needed to do God's work. Churches today who feel the wind of the Spirit and raise their sails to enter into a divine-human partnership Gray calls sailboat churches.

In contrast, churches which instead believe that God has given them an agenda (be it saving souls, making the world a better place, or spreading Christian truth) and then left it up to them to get on with it—these she calls rowboat churches. Rowboat churches focus on circumstances such as the money they have or can raise, the available volunteers, the charisma and skill of the leaders, and the demographics of their community. Rowboat churches believe progress depends on their own strength, wisdom, and resources. It's all about how hard, long, and well people are willing to row. Rowboat churches can accomplish good things, but sailboat churches can, in the words of Ephesians, "do abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine."<sup>ii</sup>

So, tapping into the power of the Spirit, we are called to partner with God to work for wholeness and healing in the world. We are called to set our sails, and catch the wind where God is blowing. This process does not neglect going to the temple. Indeed, prayer is integral to it. As is the study of the scriptures. As well as cultivating community. These are all activities that the early church devoted themselves to.<sup>iii</sup> They are critical. But the first Christians did not remain in the cozy fellowship of one another or inside the sacred walls of the temple. They engaged with the world around them, the world of cripples at the gate, the broken, the marginalized, the people in need of God's healing grace. They were agents of that grace, and so are we.

By now I hope you know that our congregation has joined our denominational initiative called Matthew 25. The "Community Conversations" on Sunday evenings this summer which I announced are a way to learn more about Matthew 25. The name comes from the parable which Jesus tells in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew.<sup>iv</sup> In the parable, the Son of Man comes in glory and separates people like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. His sole criteria is whether people behaved mercifully towards others, especially others who were hurting—the hungry, the thirsty, the estranged, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. His only yardstick is whether they did anything to help those on the margins.

Accordingly, the Matthew 25 initiative calls us to tackle two major issues in our society: poverty and racism. In both cases, the initiative asks congregations not just to provide short-term help but to seek to address root causes. If we conceive of this as a mission of healing, we're looking not for Band-aids but therapy and cure. In the story from Acts, it's noteworthy

that Peter and John didn't give the crippled man alms, i.e. Band-aids. By the power of God, in the name of Jesus, they gave him something far more valuable—they gave him health.

It is our challenge, then, to see who is at our gate. Who is crippled by poverty? Who unable to run far and jump high because of discrimination? It is our challenge truly to see them, to behold them in their God-given dignity. And then, to trust that by the power of God, we can be agents of the divine gift of wholeness. To trust that with God's wind empowering us, we can sail to places of societal health and flourishing our own rowing could never take us.

I guess you could say that we are in the business of faith healing.

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<sup>i</sup> *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice* by Joan Gray.(Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Ephesians 3:21

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 2:42

<sup>iv</sup> Matthew 25:31-46