

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Acts 4:5-12
April 22, 2018

Power in the Name

An old saying goes, “No good deed goes unpunished.” At least I thought that was an old saying. I googled it. It’s not very old. I thought it might have its origins in the Book of Acts, where a good deed leads to the arrest and trial of a couple of Christian do-gooders.

Peter and John are on their way to the three-o’clock prayer meeting in the temple when they encounter a lame beggar on the steps. He looks for a hand-out, but Peter gives him a lot more than he expects. **“I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give to you; in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”**

Well, the man does just that. He goes from panhandling to **“walking and leaping and praising God,”** all in an instant. A new man. A man delivered. A man set free. In Bible speak, a man “saved.”

That’s good news, right? The headline in evening edition of the *Jerusalem Gazette* will read, “Lame Man Leaps,” or maybe “Beggar Bounds,” or even “Panhandler Pirouettes.”

That’s what you might expect, but that’s not what happens. This good deed sets off a chain reaction of misunderstanding, resistance, and opposition.

First, the people who see this wonderful event take place don’t listen very carefully. Peter says, **“In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk,”** but the people focus on Peter, not Jesus.

The people think Peter and John are shaman-like healers – like the kind you see these days on late-night cable TV. Peter must correct their theology right away. **“It wasn’t by our power at all that caused this healing, but the power of God and the power of faith in the name of Jesus.”**

But Peter doesn't stop there. He goes on to preach about the resurrection from the dead, and that really stirs the hornets' nest. There are a lot of Sadducees in the audience, and Sadducees are about as open to talk of resurrection as the current administration is open to talk of global warming.

By the close of day, Peter and John are under house arrest. The next day, they are brought before the Sanhedrin, or council, a body essentially composed of the entire family of the high priest. This is the same the kangaroo court, you might recall, that condemned Jesus to death.

By now, the issue is not the good news that a man had been set free from bondage and is trying out for the high-hurdles team. No, by now that good deed had turned into a question of *power*.

“By what power or by what name did you do this?” the religious authorities want to know.

Back then, names had power. **“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”** Remember that one? That was one of the Big Ten, remember? There was power in the very name of the deity.

It would have been nice if the religious experts had asked, “What might this healing mean?” or “Where is God's hand in this wonderful event?” But no, it's all about power. These folks own the religious franchise. They are the only game in town, and they don't want to give market share to anybody else.

Oh, it's good for people to pray and to be faithful to God, so long as it's under the banner of the temple and following the temple's protocols. But this healing of the lame man on the temple steps – it's not in the by-laws. These “outside agitators” are stirring up trouble

Remember when Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested in Birmingham and wrote that letter from the Birmingham jail? He scribbled it on bits of paper, including toilet paper, and it was smuggled out under the jailers' noses. He wrote it to clergymen (and they were all men at the time) who had been telling him to be patient, to avoid rocking the boat.

This civil rights thing – this business of equality for “colored people” – it’s all well and good, but the timing isn’t right, they told Dr. King. Let those folks wait a little longer. Let the beggars lie on the steps of the temple for now. Eventually, their wholeness -- their freedom, their salvation, will come to them. Now is no time for a power play.

Martin wrote to those preachers,

Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But they went on with the conviction that they were a 'colony of heaven' and had to obey God rather than man.¹

I suppose Peter and John could have said to the beggar, “Silver and gold have I none, but what I have I give to you. Here’s a prayer shawl you can use as you wait for your salvation.”

But, according to Luke, the Holy Spirit would have none of that.

By what power? By what name? Well, Peter tells them, “. . . **this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.**”

Let’s get something clear: Peter’s not anti-temple. He goes there every day. He’s not anti-religion. He’s not telling folks to be spiritual without being religious. He’s telling them that God has engaged the world in a new way through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Peter says and does all this “**filled with the Holy Spirit,**” Luke is careful to say. Luke doesn’t want anybody to get the idea that Peter is doing this on his own. It’s the Spirit who is rocking the boat, the Spirit who is setting folks free, the Spirit who blows where it will and is blowing a great big hole in the status quo.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*

Where do you see yourself in this story? Are you the beggar lying on the steps, holding out your beggar's bowl? Are you now walking and leaping and praising God?

Are you in the crowd, mistaking Peter and John for super heroes? (Take another look. They're just common fisher folk from Galilee.)

Maybe you're on the council, so confident that you know exactly how God works, and it's not by raising a criminal from the dead.

There's an irony about the last few verses of this passage, in which Peter declares that the lame man walks by the power of the name of Jesus Christ. ". . . **there is no other name under the heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved,**" Peter cries.

The irony lies in the fact that Peter says this to refute the very forces that want to own and control God. And what has the church of Jesus Christ done with those words? Well, for centuries we have used them to do exactly what the Sanhedrin was trying to do -- to keep God's hands tied, to reserve God's love and mercy for those in the club, to keep the Spirit from blowing where it will.

A few years ago, Mike Pompeo, who is President Trump's current nominee for Secretary of State, told his home church (a Presbyterian church, by the way) that Islamic terrorists "will continue to press against us until we make sure . . . we know that Jesus Christ is the only solution for our world."

There's a strong element of Islamophobia in that statement, and a subtle but important distortion of the Gospel. Jesus Christ is not the *solution* for our world, but he is God's *response* to a world that demands solutions from God – solutions rather than God's living presence.

Jesus Christ is God's love and justice enfleshed in the Son of Man, the Human One. Not God's *solution*, but rather God's *incarnation*.

Jesus does not solve the problem of our broken humanity. Instead, he redeems humanity through his life, death, and living presence amongst us.

No one, not even the church, owns Jesus Christ whose salvation is a gift no one deserves.

To be *saved* in Biblical terms is to be set free, to be healed, to be made whole. But, through the centuries, the church has narrowed the definition of “salvation” to mean “escaping from hell and going to heaven.”

Today, many Christians still use Peter’s words to divide the whole of humanity into two camps – those who are for Jesus and those who are not for Jesus. This text says just the opposite – that no one has the authority to limit God’s wholeness, health, freedom, salvation. Salvation is the work of the Spirit, which is another of saying, salvation is in the name of Jesus Christ.

Thomas Long writes,

The purpose of this passage . . . is to announce that no human being or human authority can erect a religious tent – a temple or a church or a movement – and say, “Unless you come into my tent, you cannot have God.” God has acted in behalf of the whole of humanity in Jesus Christ, and there is “no other name,” no human channel, that can make exclusive claim to religious power – no denomination, no one theology, no sect, no franchise on the power of the Spirit.²

That cynical cliché about no good deed going unpunished – it isn’t true, of course. That good deed done on the steps of the temple long ago points us away from ourselves and toward the One whose name still has power to save.

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² Thomas G. Long, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B*, Volume 2, page 434