

“We Know Love By This”
May 3, 2009
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Those headed to Temple that afternoon were caught completely by surprise. Things like this just don't happen to people – not to anyone they might know – especially not to someone like him! In other words, they couldn't believe their eyes! They, the devout people, coming for afternoon prayers could hardly fathom what had happened to that man!

For nearly 40 years, in other words for a lifetime, this man had been begging at the Temple's Gate, the one called “Beautiful.” Each day he was carried to the Temple door. His own legs just wouldn't work. They were not able to bear his weight or allow him even one tottering step. We don't know if his lameness was the result of an injury at of birth or if an important developmental sequence in the secret place of his mother's womb had been interrupted. No matter, since his birth, this man had been lame – a beggar's life on the outskirts of the Temple was the only life he had ever known. The threshold to the Temple was as close as a lame man would ever be. Disfigured men like him didn't have a place on the inside.

But then... in the middle of a typically ordinary afternoon...everything changed. This is what happened. It wasn't a special day. It was the middle of an otherwise ordinary afternoon. A man born lame sat and begged alms from people who were going into the Temple. He had been placed at this spot every day of his life since childhood. Some days were better than others. On a good day, a kind person would press a coin into his hand. On bad days, no one would pay any attention at all. And a lot of his days were bad; people simply looked the other way when he called out to them.

It was around 3:00 p.m., the time for the afternoon prayers, on this ordinary day that Peter and John came through the Gate Beautiful. The man saw Peter and John nearing the Temple. Of course, he didn't know it was *Peter and John*; he simply saw two men who might drop a few coins his way. With downcast eyes he cried out to them, “Alms, alms... alms for the poor.” Out of the corner of his eye, the man could see that the two men had come to a stop in front of him. He could see their feet, their dusty feet- he dared not meet their eyes. The men didn't offer any money, instead they spoke these strange words; words which no one else would have said to him, “Look at us!” Hesitantly, the man lifted his head. For a moment, they simply stared at one another. But then, Peter said, “I don't have any silver or gold. But I will give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus from Nazareth, get up and start walking.” Peter then offered the man his right hand and helped the lame man -the man who couldn't stand, the man who couldn't walk – Peter helped the man – one crippled his entire life - to his feet.

At once the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped up and starting walking. He walked alongside Peter and John into the Temple. He didn't simply walk; he was jumping and praising God. *Everyone* saw him walking, jumping and praising God. The man kept a tight hold on Peter and John as a crowd gathered around them in amazement. With astonishment they recognized who he was!

This was the beggar who for nearly 40 years had been lying all those years at gate. This cripple was leaping! They could not imagine what could have happened to this man!

Peter, with delight I dare say, said to the crowd, "Are you surprised at what has happened? Why are you staring at *us*? Do you think we have some power of our own? Do you think that we were able to make this man walk because we are so religious? You know this man better than we do. You know that he was lame from birth, yet now you see him walking and leaping and praising God. This is what has happened. We invited him to look at us. We invited him into a new way of seeing life and he accepted. He took my hand. His faith in the name of Jesus has made this man well. He was born lame and now by the resurrection power of Jesus Christ is made whole! A new life, a future filled with possibilities awaits him. No longer will he be left outside".

Suddenly, while Peter and John were still talking to the people, some priests, the captain of the temple guard, and some Sadducees arrived. These people were angry. What had ignited their anger? Were they afraid of the gathering mob? Were they still on edge from the events of just a few weeks ago, when crowds had gathered around a trouble maker named Jesus? To keep things under control, the leaders whisked the apostles away, throwing them into prison. Surely that would teach them a lesson. A night in jail would shut them up.

However, it was already too late; by now a crowd had witnessed the power of God unleashed into the world. *By the power of the unquenchable, unstoppable, undying love of Jesus Christ lives of broken persons were being made whole..* By now, nearly 5000 persons claimed Jesus as Lord, and only two of whom were in prison! However, even prison and threatening words weren't going to silence even these two!

Yes, Peter and John found themselves in prison for being involved in a kind deed through which a crippled man found healing. Our reading from Acts today tells us that the next morning they were called before the Sanhedrin. Peter and John were forced to stand smack dab in the middle of this esteemed and powerful religious council. They were interrogated with these two interrelated questions: "By what power and in whose name have you done this?" In other words, "who do you know (meaning "who do you have access to") that has this kind of power?"

Strange, why wouldn't everyone rejoice at the news **and** the sight that a life-long, lame man had been made well? Doesn't everyone thrill at the sight of a miracle? Why

wouldn't the temple officials be glad that there would be one less needy hand to pass by each day? No, the officials didn't really care that the man was healed or not; that wasn't the issue. They were angry because Peter and John were teaching that death itself hadn't been able to overcome the resurrection power of Jesus. Jesus had been raised from the dead, and this Jesus had given this man the gift of a resurrected life. The officials were angry that Peter and John, in the name of the resurrected Jesus, had invited a broken man to wholeness and full place in the community of faith. They were angry that by the power of God through Jesus he had been made whole.

Take note, it was not the miracle itself that led to the arrest of Peter and John. It was the *explanation* of this miracle that they gave. *Peter is done denying Jesus*. Boldly, Peter and John proclaim healing in the name of Jesus. (DB *How Do You Tell...*) And those in power, those with a heavy hand of control didn't like it. They didn't like it one bit...

Why not? Why don't *we* like it when we come face to face with the healing power of God...wherever it springs forth – be it in a distant and perhaps distrusted country, in believers of a different faith, in a local congregation just down the street from us... Why do we resist the healing power of God's love even in our very selves?

What is our reaction when *we* stumble onto holy ground? It's not only ancient religious leaders who react strongly, even violently to the power of God. Even the church today may seek to quarantine the power of Love that looks as surprising and as transformative as this. The beggar no longer begs. Instead, he runs into the temple to worship.

When the power of God's love is released, people don't stay in their accustomed places. Power dynamics are challenged. There is uproar and outrage – even when that which once was crippled stands strong among us. Yet, the Spirit of God is like the wind. It blows where it will...not where I have decided, not where the latest committee meeting has mandated, and not necessarily through whom the religious world deems worthy, acceptable or appropriate.

The recording elder of the Epistle of 1 John pastors the growing church in Ephesus with challenging yet comforting words. No matter the age or era, “we know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Christ's love is known to us through his actions. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says “I lay down my life for the sheep...no one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again.” Jesus says... “I have power...”

Christ's powerful love for *our* world is known through *our* actions. Our life together as the Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship is more than a gathering of friendly faces and similar interests. We are called to share our lives with each other in tangible and particular ways. We bear one another's burdens – whatever those burdens may be. As we share one another's joys, they become our own. Through Christ's love we are

empowered to lay down our lives. Through resurrection power we are healed and strengthened to take them up again. In the love of Christ we live and move and have our being. In the love of Christ we live and die and are continually raised to new life.

Knowing love like this, we go expectantly into the ordinary days of next week. For it may be on a very ordinary afternoon -perhaps even around 3:00 o'clock - that we will discover again, or maybe for the first time, that we are healed! May the world around us share in our amazement, marveling with us at what is happening in our lives.

In Jesus - God who is Love - *really* walks among us, inviting us to arise and walk with him. Yes, we will meet other travelers for whom the power and name of Jesus is threatening. That's nothing new in the Jesus story. It's always been that way.

As followers of Jesus we live, daily facing the reality of dying and death. Yet by the resurrection power of Jesus, over and over again, we are raised to new life. As Easter people what do we have to offer the "lame" and the "broken one" who waits for us each day?

Like Peter, let's offer what we have – not lamenting what we don't have. Let's bear witness to our encounters with the healing compassion of the risen Christ. With the boldness of Peter and John, may we, in the power and name of Jesus, look directly into the "faces" of our wounded world, offering our hands as invitation to new ways of walking, nurturing newness of life!