

Scripture Lesson: Acts 3: 1-10

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.' And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

Fixing our Attention as Easter People

Five years ago, I became part of the Board of the United Theological College in Montreal. I was brought on as treasurer and came on at a time of strategic planning and soul searching about the future of the college. A couple of years ago, UTC merged into the Anglican Montreal Diocesan College (DIO) and a deeper sense of ecumenical theological education has emerged. The principal of DIO is the Rev Dr. Jesse Zink and his leadership, vision and wisdom has been invaluable. While I am not on the amalgamated Board, I enjoy hearing Jesse's wisdom through a weekly email.

This week he was reflecting on a recent ministry seminar class in which they were discussing a book that describes how our society is focused on productivity and efficiency. One result is that many have the feeling of constantly being time-stressed and yet not sure that they are focusing on the things that really matter. The class participants felt the description rang true and then the tougher question was what does the good news of Jesus Christ have to say to a world shaped by the stress of efficiency and the spiritual unfulfillment that may result. It sounds like it was quite a good discussion including wondering if churches are too influenced by the culture and how can the church speak into and live in that culture.

I read Jesse's short reflection before I read the Acts reading that we are focusing on today. I was struck by the story of Peter and John encountering the beggar at the Temple gate, and Peter saying to him, "*I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.*" I realize that last week I mentioned that we were finished with the focus on the stories of Peter, but hear here is another.

Combining the story from DIO and the scripture reading, I am left wondering, "what do we have to give - to offer into the world - as individuals and the church - as Easter people.

A world where neighbours are hungry.

A world where many are stressed out

A world where many live in loneliness.

A world where self esteem is being shaped by social media.

A world where there has been a breakdown of civility and respect in public discourse.

One of the details in the story of John and Peter coming upon the beggar at the Temple Gate is that there is a focus on seeing. Look at us - say Peter and John and then we hear that the beggar fixed his attention on them. If we were to ask the beggar, I wonder how many people walking by looked at him. How many noticed him?

I admit that when I pass a street person or when stopped at a traffic light, and see a person coming along the row of cars, I resist making eye contact. Maybe that is because there is something about eye contact that makes it a lot harder to ignore the reality that I see, the reality of privilege that has been denied to others.

We may not have silver or gold to offer, but what we have we can give? What do we have to share?

We may get distracted in thinking about this story by the questions we may have about how this man moved from being lame to jumping and leaping. The account of physical healing may be a barrier to us seeing this story not just literally, but symbolically as well. What can we offer that can give life to those who are wounded by the priorities and systems of our time?

There are people, there are a lot of churches that find themselves in a time of despair and discouragement. Scarcity has become a widespread force of paralysis. We don't have enough ... time, energy, people, money. It is true that resources have changed and shifted, but ... we also have access to other emphasis and resources that can't be measured or quantified.

What do we, as part of the church of Jesus Christ have to say into our world? What do we, have to say to those who may long to leap and dance but are pushed down - kept outside the gate - by messages and systems? Where do we fix our attention as Easter people? The word "fix" has a couple of connotations. It can mean focus - how do we focus our attention? And it can mean correct/repair/reevaluate - how do we correct, reevaluate our attention?

This is one of the big challenges about being the church in our time. In many of our lifetimes, we have seen great change in the church and for many of us it is hard to know how to adapt. Hard to change our attention, our way of being. We are puzzled by how to be faithful and relevant amidst generations with different frameworks of relating and being in the world.

During Lent, I co-lead a lunchtime series of four sessions for the cluster Lenten program on how to be an inviting church. As co-leaders, we were some of the youngest participants. It was a tough conversation to think outside of a box about how to invite others, knowing that as soon as there is newness in a group, the group changes and change threatens what is familiar.

In a few moments, we will be sharing more information about the Brookfield Community Food Cupboard. It has been a very energizing process to plan and work for the opening of this project. From this experience, one of the clues I have to the question of how are we to be church in this time and context, we can offer the gift of facilitating conversation about needs, and connecting various parts and interests and people to make something happen that hopefully will be greater than the sum of the parts.

I think we have some other clues about what it means to be church. Peter and John affirmed the worth of the man begging - too bad the story didn't even give him the dignity of a name.

The resources of faith - love, hope, trust, dignity, worth - are not limited. We should never let these gifts come under the spell of scarcity. We are invited to live with a generosity of hope, of possibility, of dignity and worth.

One of the things I have been learning from working on the Food Cupboard project is the gift of faith and trust. We don't know where we are going to get enough food to make this cupboard sustainable - but there

is a sense of trust that it will come. There has been great energy and enthusiasm from various individuals and groups so we need to find ways to channel generosity and hope. Maybe as the church we know something about that; maybe as the church we will learn something about that.

As Easter people - we live with wonder and mystery of hope. We are invited to imagine how new life can emerge. We are invited to look and to see and to pay attention to the needs around us. We are invited to remember that the church is not the building, it is people and so we need to be the church into the community and world. So, let us fix our attention by being Easter people. And there is joy in that focus and possibility.

What we offer, what we share, what we live is in response to all that we have received in trust and promise. Amen.