

Disrupting the Order of Things

Second in a Series on the Acts of the Apostles

by

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Acts 3:1-10; 4:1-11

³One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. ²And 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. ³When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. ⁴Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." ⁵And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. ⁶But 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." ⁷And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. ⁸Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. ⁹All the people saw him walking and praising God, ¹⁰and 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.

⁴While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, ²much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. ³So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand. ⁵The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, ⁶with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. ⁷When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” ⁸Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, ⁹if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, ¹⁰let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that 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. ¹¹This Jesus is ‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’

What was it about the early Christian message which got the authorities so alarmed and angry? You would think that it would be great news that God was alive, and active doing good things, and was providing a motivating vision for a fairer world, a more just society, a place where a miraculous healing might even interrupt your usual pattern of going and coming from worship.

Peter is on his way into the Temple to pray when he confronts the man lame from birth. That's what prayer does, you know. Deep and honest prayer causes us to find ourselves face to face with the brokenness of the world, and God knows – there is plenty to fill up our prayers these days. This is where we find the church in this text. Not inside the Temple, but on its doorstep confronting the pain of the world.¹ Peter is being the church in this moment; he is doing what Jesus did before him; he is doing what the Spirit is now empowering him to do in the name of Jesus. He is doing what the church is being called to do today.

Now, like the lame man suddenly walking, and leaping and praising God, we have to take a leap out of the text in order to understand it. The Acts of the Apostles is filled with hard-to-believe moments from beginning to end. From the Pentecost assembly gathered with a multitude of languages spoken and yet fully understanding each other, to the two church members getting called up before the Stewardship Committee and being struck dead for not being honest about a profit from a sale, to a person being picked up and miraculously transported from one place to another, to many other miraculous things, Acts is filled with church activities that seem quite foreign to us. But we miss the point if we assume we must either classify this book as historical chronicle or simply an amusing sampling of ancient fables.

¹ Grateful to my friend, Tom Are, for this insight in “Christianity is More than Believing in Jesus,” 5/18/08, Village Presbyterian.

The purpose of Acts is theological, not historical. It describes “God as the church’s creator and preserver. Like most books worth reading, it unfolds with lots of flourish and embellishment. Acts clearly includes some historical reporting, for it speaks of real people and places, but it’s intent is to put forth a basic understanding of God as intimately involved in the spread of the gospel, as present among the community of faith. The story conveys a theological vision.²

So in today’s text, we see how this theological vision disrupts the status quo. People have carried the lame man to the Gate of the Temple to beg. Going in Peter and John stop and look at him rather than passing by. Peter says they have no silver or gold, but what they do have is the name of Jesus. Giving the man the name of Jesus, they restore him to fullness of life. As a result of the healing, they are arrested and thrown into prison. The next day, when asked where their power comes from, they testify to the life-giving power of God.

What was it about the early Christian message which got the authorities so alarmed and angry? Here is the simple, and yet disconcerting, answer. The gospel of Jesus Christ often disrupts the established order of things. The followers of Jesus Christ disrupt the social order of things. If you are in power – in the temporal, political, economic, material modes of how the world is so often accustomed to ordering things, then the Good News of God is disruptive. Friends, we are currently in a moment of profound disruption.

We cannot justify the violence that is being perpetrated in any of the protests around the country. But the peaceful disruptions may be a thing of God’s Spirit: calling for a more just system of policing and incarceration, educating ourselves about systemic racism, owning our own racism and changing our ways, working to stop and reverse climate change, seeing and serving the poor at the Gate. That is where we find ourselves called in this story to be disruptive for the sake of the gospel.

² N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone Study*, p. 27

As one biblical scholar notes, “Acts is less a book about what God will do someday than it is an appeal to begin discovering God’s presence, and then living in light of God’s promised benefits right now. God is present in the life, worship and ministry of his followers as well as in the places they will go.”³

Indian novelist, Arundhati Roy, has written about how the pandemic has taken hold of her country as it has ours in an article entitled, “The Pandemic is a Portal.” In her native India, as in America, the health crisis has brought with it an economic crisis, and it has exposed long fissures of division in their social orders of class and race and economic disparity between the wealthy and the poor. However, she looks at this new reckoning with a hopeful vision writing: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us.” We can drag that all behind us. Or we can walk through (this pandemic portal) lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”⁴

I believe this story from the Acts of the Apostles about a healing, about the invocation of Jesus Christ, the arrest and Peter’s testimony that God raised Jesus from the dead, is calling us to engage in the profoundly disruptive work of the gospel in our time. This is work we can do together even while we are apart. WE can see the poor at the Gate and respond with the open hand of Jesus Christ. We can confront the powers more intent on maintaining the status quo of white privilege by working for racial and social justice. We can pray without ceasing for the pain of the world and exercise empathy and compassion.

³ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive Word, Disruptive Gospel* p.23 ff

⁴ Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal,” *Financial Times*, April 2020

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* traces the family of Congregationalist pastor, John Ames, across three generations from the Civil War into the 20th Century. The story unfolds through carefully drawn characters describing how we are shaped by the spiritual battles that rage among us, a spiritual quest that still rages in America's heart. In the middle of the novel, as the old John Ames is dying he tries to impart some insight and wisdom to his namesake, Jack, who has caused him a world of trouble. The old pastor says: This is the important thing... which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, what is the Lord asking of me in this situation. If you confront insult or antagonism ... your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, this is an emissary sent from the Lord... the occasion for me to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me, you are free to act otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate..."⁵

Friends, "the otherwise" we are free to act upon is the good work of Jesus Christ. The healing, redemptive, justice work of Jesus Christ. Today, this word from above dares us to be disruptive for the sake of the world God so loves.

AMEN.

⁵ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 124.