

Acts 3:1-10

“Hand Up or Hand Out?”

Church, what does it look like to love your neighbor as yourself? (pause) What does it look like to love one another as Jesus loves us? (pause) What does that look like? (pause) I think it looks like giving people a hand up instead of a hand out. I think it means giving people the very best gift we have ever received. The best gift we have ever received is the gift of God’s Son Jesus Christ, and the opportunity to follow Christ as one of His disciples. Let me show you where I got this crazy idea.

In Acts, chapter 3, Peter and John are heading into the temple to pray. They encounter a beggar who has been unable to walk since birth. This man has never run – not even as a child. This man has never walked. This man has never so much as stood up on his own power. His parents never knew the joy of watching him learn to walk. He never learned a trade. He could not work. The only way he could support himself was to beg for money. This man was completely dependent on everyone else. I am sure things were not so different back then. I bet most people tried not to make eye contact with this lame beggar. Those who ignored this lame beggar made him even more dependent on those who would give. Those who gave him alms enabled him to continue begging for more money. Cultural and societal norms made this man a dependent on everyone else. What does it say about the church that this man sat in the doorway of the temple to beg for money? (pause) I wonder if it does not say that the people of God have a soft spot for the poor, but it is easier to ignore them or give them money than to get their hands dirty by getting involved in another person’s life.

Check out what happens when Peter and John encounter this man. They do not avoid making eye contact. They look right at the man. (pause) It’s uncomfortable. The beggar turns away. Peter commands the man to look at him. That’s part of the power of the Gospel. God sees us right where we are. God sees us in our brokenness and God loves us right where we are. However, God does not want us to stay broken. God does not want to leave us sitting in the dirt – a dependent on everyone else. God sees us where we are, caught up in the systems and structures of our culture and society when we are supposed to know better. It can be uncomfortable to be seen where we are by the people who know what we really are and to whom we belong. I don’t blame the beggar for looking away. It must have been uncomfortable. However, Peter does not let the beggar wiggle. Peter, the fisherman, knows when he has one on the hook. Peter commands the man saying, “Look at us” (v.4).

Peter doesn’t have any money. This alone breaks the cycle. Peter does not ignore the man. Peter does not give the man money. In the name of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit Peter gives this lame beggar a hand up. Through the name of Jesus, Peter helps this man to literally get up on his feet. The man’s legs, ankles and feet find strength they have never known. It is a miracle. It’s a miracle, and the people who recognized this man were amazed he could walk. They wondered how this is possible.

We are supposed to know how this is possible. (pause) Church, do you know how this is possible? (pause) We know this is possible because we have experienced the miracle of God’s saving grace in our lives. My question is, do we want to be a part of a miracle? (pause) Church, do you want to be part of a miracle? (pause) We live at a time when our society and our culture put a good deal of emphasis and uses a good deal of influence to coerce us to believe we only need to worry about what makes us feel good. We only need to worry about us and what is ours; our family and our friends, and the rest of the world can go take a hike. Church, is the most segregated hour of the week. Do you know why? (pause) Because people like to worship with people who look, think and talk like themselves. Let me ask y’all something, have you ever gone to or visited a church that was not clickish? (pause) I have been a member of a big church. I have been a member of, and served tee tiny churches, and you know what? They’re all filled with clicks. They are all filled with clicks. Do you know why?

(pause) Because we like to be with people who are just like us. When we hide with people who are exactly like us we ignore the people around us who need help the most. We ignore the people around us. We ignore the poor because, "Hey, they are not like us." We ignore the working poor who can always find money for cigarettes but cannot find money for food or to pay their bills. We ignore those who are struggling so we don't have to face the bile of guilt we feel rising in our throats. It's uncomfortable. Who wants to face that?

For those same reasons we don't like to face the idea that there are children in our schools who come from far less than ideal home situations. There are kids who go to school hungry. There are kids who go to school without socks and underwear. I am not talking about kids in Uganda, Mexico, South America or China. I am talking about kids right here in Denton. Do you know what's worse than ignoring the problem? (pause) What's worse than ignoring the problem is throwing money at the problem so we don't have to get involved. We don't want to be involved in other people's issues and mess. That's why when we are sitting with someone in the hospital, or with someone who has experienced loss we say things like, "It must be God's will." Or, "God needed another angel in heaven." (makes an odd disgusted face) What?! (pause) Saying those things is the same as throwing money at someone else's problems. It doesn't fix anything. It makes people feel good in the moment, but not really. Then it gives us an easy out to say we tried and then leave. (pause) My brothers and sisters, God expects more. (pause) God expects more from God's Church. God expects more from all of us. I think God expects us to get involved in the lives of others who are not like us.

Look at Peter in this story. Peter wades right into the uncomfortable moment. Peter calls the lame man to look him in the face. Peter is honest. "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6). Sisters and brothers, I do not expect you to make the lame walk. However, I think Christ expects us all to wade into the uncomfortable waters of other people's mess. I think God expects us to build relationships with people who are a hot mess. We are to give them hope. We are to lead by example. My brothers and sisters how is God working in your life? (pause) Where is God calling you to share the Gospel with those who need to receive it most? (pause) Please think about this. There are loads and loads of people who think the Church is filled with hypocrites who sit around judging others. Have you ever considered the people outside the Church might think it's a miracle for God's people to be willing to walk beside people instead of judging them?

Peter says, I have no silver and gold, but what Peter does have is an active and lively relationship with Jesus Christ. As y'all sit there in the pews this morning, can you say you have an active and lively relationship with Jesus Christ? (pause) Are you working toward an active and lively relationship with Jesus Christ? (pause) What is getting in your way? (pause) The whole book of Acts is the story of what happens when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. The question I keep finding in Acts is, "What do we do?" The Holy Spirit, like Jesus, turns our world upside down. Our challenge is to ask the question, "What is the most faithful way I can respond to what God is telling me through the Holy Spirit, right now?" Based on what you have heard this morning, is it enough for you, for you personally to ignore those who are hurting in our community? (pause) Is it enough to just throw money at their problem so we can walk away? (pause) How then is God calling us to respond this morning? (pause) I think the Holy Spirit is calling us to follow Peter's example. I think the Holy Spirit is calling us to be mindful of our relationship with God. We need to be strong in our relationship with God. We need the power of the Holy Spirit so we can show our neighbors, our family, our community and the world the miracle they do not expect. Sadly, the miracle they do not expect is for the Church to be the hands and feet of Christ. (pause) Can y'all do that this week? (pause) Please, promise yourselves you will find a way to try to reach out to someone new this week – even – maybe especially if it's gonna get messy.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen