

Sermon – September 10, 2023
“What I Have I Give You”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 3:1-10

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill open hearts, and anoint these words as a blessing for your people. May these words ignite our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you. Welcome to week two of Kingdomtide, a time in the life of the church when we place additional focus on the inbreaking kingdom of God. Keep the Northumberland Good News Club in your prayers this week as we return Wednesday to the elementary school for another semester of sharing Jesus with children.

We are still working our way through the book of Acts. Let me begin with a bit of a top-level view of where we have been so far. In chapter one, Jesus ascends to heaven and the disciples begin to wait to be clothed with the promised power from on high, that they might be Jesus' witnesses starting in Jerusalem and moving outward to all of the world. While they wait for the power Jesus promised to arrive, the disciples gather in the temple during the day and in their homes at night to pray and worship God. In chapter two, Power from on high is poured out

on the disciples! Holy Spirit arrives. The Church is born, the Church being the people of God filled with the Spirit of God for the world. When Holy Spirit Power arrives, Peter stands up, addresses the crowd, and shares the Good News of Jesus Christ with those drawn to the manifestations of Holy Spirit in the lives of the disciples. Peter's words are heard and that day 3000 men are baptized and "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."ⁱ The kingdom of God begins to break in; the disciples of Jesus begin to be his witnesses in Jerusalem. As these new believers continue to gather, Luke tells us that "many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles."ⁱⁱ Chapter three of Acts begins with a key sign. Let's look at that sign together this morning and see what we might learn about how we might be the Church of Jesus Christ, the people of God filled with the Spirit of God for all the world.

We are going to move from our high-level view of the book of Acts, the Google Earth big picture, zooming down into the Book of Acts to a specific place and time. We are going to the Beautiful Gate at 3 pm, the hour of prayer in the temple. As we zoom into this place, we come to the temple, the center of life in Jerusalem, where the buildings are adorned with beautiful white stones. We move from the center structure where the Holy of Holies is found in the temple complex to one of the gates that separates the court of the Gentiles from the Court of Israel. The gate marks how far unclean people can approach the center of the temple in the temple complex. The gate is called the Beautiful Gate, a gate scholars think had large, 75-foot-tall double doors overlaid with Corinthian bronze. The shining bronze of Corinth makes the gate more beautiful than the other gates which are overlaid with just silver and gold. As we zoom in more, we move to just outside of the Beautiful Gate and find people carrying a beggar and laying him at the entrance to the temple at the Beautiful Gate. And if we look just a bit farther out into the outer court of the temple, we will see Peter and John walking towards the Beautiful Gate. It is 3 pm, the time of the evening sacrifice in the temple, the time when people gather in the temple for prayer. Three pm was also the time when fire fell on Mt. Carmel when Elijah called the people of Israel back to God, and three pm was the time when Jesus died on the cross outside of Jerusalem. Peter and John are coming for worship and prayer. They are also headed for an apparently unknown divine appointment at the Beautiful Gate. We are now at ground level in the Book of Acts. The beggar, lame from birth, is in place to beg from those going into the temple and the apostles are approaching, focused on praying in the temple.

As we gaze at this scene, I think there are some questions that might come to our minds that we should acknowledge, such as “Why is this man outside of the court of the Israelites in the temple complex? Why does the temple not help him but leaves him to beg for his daily bread? How can the place where God is present not help this man?” Do we see the contrast of the Beautiful Gate, covered in the extravagance of shining expensive bronze and a poor man begging for his daily bread? Do we recall the parable of Jesus about the rich man and Lazarus who lay at the rich man’s gate? Those in Jerusalem know the lame man. He is forty years old and has been begging for many years. He is brought to the gate daily by people who have to carry him so that he might ask those going into the temple for money for daily bread. Who will give him what he needs to live this day?

The lame man sees two men walking into the gate and, as he has for so many years, he calls out to them, asking for money. Those two men are disciples of Jesus: Peter, and John. When the two hear a cry for help, they stop. They disrupt their plans and both look intently at the man. The idea of looking intently is not a glance. It is not the quick look I give to those who stand at a busy intersection with a handwritten cardboard sign asking for money in rush hour traffic. The Greek word used here by Luke is used when Jesus steps into ministry in the synagogue and those present look intently at Jesus as he begins to speak. Luke uses this word again when the disciples are found by angels looking into the cloud that keeps them from seeing Jesus as he ascends to heaven. The look Peter and John give the man is a full on, deep, long look that sees fully the one they have focused their vision upon. They see the man, they see his need, and they see signs of how long he has been waiting for help, not the help of daily bread but the help that comes from Jesus. They see him as Jesus sees him. They don’t toss him a small coin and go on their way to be on time for prayer in the temple; instead, they stop and look intently at him.

Peter gives his first command to the man, telling him to “Look at us”ⁱⁱⁱ The lame man hears Peter’s words, and his expectation grows that he might receive a gift from these two strangers who are looking at him. Surely, because they have stopped to speak with him, they will be very generous. Maybe he will have bread for several days. So, the lame man looks at Peter and John.

The next verse, verse six, is a verse we might want to underline in our Bibles and commit to memory. “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.”^{iv} Peter is not carrying silver and gold. He has no generous monetary gift to share, but what Peter has within him is Jesus Christ. He has power from on high from Jesus Christ, a power he is ready to willingly give to another who will receive it. Peter gives the lame man a second command: “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!”

It is at this point in reading the scripture that my mind begins to wonder about what might be going on within Peter’s mind. I wonder if Peter knew what was going to happen after he spoke the name of Jesus over the lame man. In the Hebrew culture, when you used the name of someone, that person’s name gave you their power and authority. When Peter speaks in the name of Jesus, he speaks as one claiming the authority and power of Jesus Christ. But I wonder if he knew for sure that Jesus would heal through him. Maybe by this point Peter has healed so many people in Jerusalem that he has confidence. Luke has told us earlier that the apostles did many signs and wonders, but we don’t know when Peter and John encountered the lame man. So, I wonder if Peter knew what Jesus would do through him. This moment is key; it is a moment in the story of the early church when his followers trusted that Jesus would work through them. Peter and John trust Jesus to be present and to continue through them what he had done when he was on earth. Watch what Peter does next. He reaches down and takes the lame man’s right hand and raises him up. We might remember Jesus taking the dead girl by the hand and raising her up. Peter does what he has seen Jesus do. He reaches out his hand and acts, lifting the lame man up, and as he does, the lame man’s feet and ankles are made strong! Strength surges through this man’s body and he jumps up, something he has never before done. He stands up, he begins to walk, and then he goes on through the Beautiful Gate and into the temple inner court with Peter and John, walking and leaping and praising God. What Jesus did when he was on earth, he continues to do through his power-from-on-high filled disciples. Don’t miss that Jesus, through Peter and John, has done something beautiful at the temple gate called Beautiful.

For those who are reading Acts, as we move through this sermon series, from your reading you will know there is more to this story than Peter and John healing a forty-year-old lame man in the temple gate called Beautiful. The lame man’s praise draws a crowd. He is recognized, and Peter again preaches the Gospel with a great number of Jews coming to believe in Jesus. There is more than a significant sign and blessing for the lame man that will come from Jesus working through Peter and John. The significance of what has been done in Jesus’ name

cannot be denied and it will come to the attention of those who are in charge of the temple. We will save that topic for next week. Today we need to ask ourselves the questions those in the crowd will ask, questions we have heard before in Acts: “What does this mean? What are we to do?” Peter will tell the crowds in his sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ with them to repent, to turn to God so that their sins may be wiped out. Peter invites them into something more dramatic and miraculous than the healing of a lame man. Peter invites them to repent, to align with Jesus, so their sins may be removed. There is forgiveness in Jesus Christ available to those who will repent and align with God. The sign done by Jesus points the crowd in Jerusalem to something more than just physical healing. It points them to the forgiveness of sin and to times of refreshing from the Lord in the name of Jesus.

Let’s move from the healing at the Beautiful Gate to our setting in Burgess and Ophelia on Sunday the tenth of September and ask ourselves the questions we hear being asked by people in the Book of Acts: “What does the healing of the lame man by Jesus through Peter and John mean for us today?” and “What are we to do?” Did anyone see a person in need by the doors to the church this morning as we came in for worship? I did not see anyone as I came in by the back door. The lack of someone begging at the doors to our church does comment on where people get help from today. There are many reasons they are not at our doors, from government sponsored programs to plentiful sources of supplemental food at food banks to a lack of a helping response found by those who have come to our doors in the past. But their absence may also speak to the expectations of those in our community who are in need. They do not often see our church as a place where they find help. The lame man is outside the Beautiful Gate of the temple and the temple leadership does not seem to be interested in caring for him. Those who are going into the temple to worship God must have regularly given him alms to provide daily bread for him, but the temple, the place where God is present, does not seem to have been a source of help. Part of what we must seek to understand is if we are relevant in this community. Are people with needs drawn to this building because they see Jesus acting in lives in the community through us? Are we at work in this community taking Jesus out to those who are in need? Are we seeking to see those who need help? Are we praying over them in the name of Jesus? Are we reaching out and taking them by the hand and raising them up so that Jesus can work in their lives to heal, to forgive sins, and to restore them to a right relationship with God? Is Jesus working through us to meet physical needs, to heal the sick, to open the eyes of the blind, to tell

others about the year of the Lord's favor, to forgive sins in the name of Jesus? I think word of such a place would spread rapidly in this community.

Even if we encounter people in the community with needs, our response too often may be to ask ourselves, "Who am I to help?" and then pass them by as we are not capable as an individual of providing much if any help. We look to our own strength, courage, assets, and abilities to shape our response. The questions we should ask ourselves when we encounter needs in our community are "Who is Jesus?" and "What is Jesus doing here?" and "What is Jesus seeking to do through us for a person we are intently looking at?" These questions begin to change our response not to what we are capable of but to open us to the reality that we have Jesus Christ within us and he is seeking to work through us to continue his mission on earth. What would it take to transform our time of sharing our joys each Sunday morning to a time of sharing how Jesus worked through us this week? How does our sharing become stories of moments where we are sharing how we were led to see someone and then did what Jesus wanted to do for that person by letting Christ in us become Christ working through us? We should desire that our time of sharing how Christ was at work through us in the community would become a time of sharing so many experiences of Jesus working through us that we had time for nothing else but to praise God. We are the Church, the people of God filled with the Spirit of God for the world. We are sent out with Christ in us to be Christ to the world around us, to be the Church in this place. We, like Peter and John, are to be doing what Jesus did and is still doing among those who are in the world who are crying out for help. How are we transformed from those who come to a church building to those who will stop at the Beautiful Gate when we see people in need and ask Jesus what is he doing in their lives and what Jesus is waiting to do through us for them? We are to be those who are willing to speak over people's needs in Jesus' name and to have faith to take the risk and reach out to them, take them by the hand, and let Jesus raise them from death to life. We are to be those who are to be seeking to be at work in the name of Jesus right here, right now. Remember we have one job: when we are filled with power from on high, we are to be Jesus' witnesses in this place and to all the world. Let me encourage each of us to take a risk this week. Listen for Jesus inviting us to be him in this community. Take a risk, look intently at people in need, reach out your hand, and pray in the name of Jesus for them. Put yourself in a place where, if Holy Spirit doesn't show up, you will fail. Don't rely on our strength: rely on Jesus working through us. Don't be afraid to fail, or think we have failed, and come in here and

tell our stories. You know how those stories go: I felt the nudge to offer to pray for that person's need I saw and I decided that Jesus could heal at a distance and I would pray later. I know that story because I have lived it out too many times. Yet, that is an awesome story. It is not the same story as what Luke shares about Peter and John letting Jesus heal the lame man through them, but it is a story that says, "I love Jesus enough to see what he wants me to see and to pray for those needs, but I still need help to have the courage to stop, look intently, speak to a person, and pray in the name of Jesus over them, to let go and let Jesus work through me." Let's be those who are out in our community taking risks and sharing our successes and failures with each other.

Pray with me. Jesus, we confess we too often see a need in our community and ask "What can I do?" and decide we don't have the ability to do anything. Jesus, change our question to "What is Jesus seeking to do through us to meet this need?" And then open our hearts to speak your name and reach out to those in need and let you raise them up through us. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ NRSV Acts 2:42 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3261). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ NRSV Acts 2:43, Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ NRSV Acts 3:4, Ibid, p 3263.

^{iv} NRSV Acts 3:6, Ibid.