

This week I thought about the man from the story in the Book of Acts sitting at what was called the Beautiful Gate. It's a gate named nowhere else in scripture, so the location remains a mystery. The location could have been the gate of the Gentiles that led into the women's court, or it could have been a gate where wealthy people entered the temple, which would have been an ideal location to beg for money.

Something about the story bothered me, and being at home, I found plenty of distractions. In addition to Zoom groups, making phone calls, preparing for Sunday, I found other things to do: feed the birds and dogs, dust the furniture, vacuum the carpets, pull a few weeds in between the rainy days, finish a book. It would have been the same had I been in my office: rearrange things on my desk, walk the halls, answer the phone, read articles piled in the corners of my office, get a snack. Either place has convenient distractions. Have you ever had that happen? Doing something, even mundane tasks, to avoid thinking about something else?

I wasn't quite sure why I avoided pondering the scripture for this week until I read another pastor's thoughts when he confessed, "I never really knew what to do with healing stories from the Bible. Maybe it's just me, but the first place my head goes to is whether it really happened."¹

That's it! I thought to myself. What do I say about this healing story in the Book of Acts when the news reminds me every day of the hundreds of thousands of people who have died from the coronavirus? *Where was their healing?* I wondered, so I felt uncomfortable talking about a healing story.

Some interpreters of biblical stories suggest healings were metaphorical, representing something else. Although some stories in the Bible do use metaphors to represent a deeper truth, time and time again Jesus offered healing to those who were ill, so it's hard to push aside all these healing stories as symbolic.

As I read the biblical story several times this week, I began to notice subtle clues offered by

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Luke, the author of the Book of Acts. The man had been unable to walk since birth, so friends carried him to the temple every day so he could beg for money. When Peter and John arrived, Peter said, “Look at us.” As the man looked up expectantly hoping for a gift of money, Peter replied, “I don’t have any money, but I will give you what I do have.”

I imagine the man had mixed emotions at this point. *What, no money? But you have something better? Hum...what could that be?* It’s like those contestants on game shows who face the dilemma: you can have the money in this envelope, or you can trade it for what’s behind Door #2. What do you do? Take the known amount of money? Or take a risk and possibly get something even better?

Years ago, I remember a couple coming to a church I pastored in Illinois, asking for help. When I asked what they wanted, they weren’t quite sure. They had lost everything. They had no where to stay. As I listened to their story, I began to realize their situation was much larger than what I could provide. I sat with them for quite some time,

listening to them talk about their lives and the possibilities for their next step. I confessed that I could not solve their dilemma, but I suggested we could pray together for God’s guidance. After praying with them, the woman said, “You have been very helpful. By talking with you, I know what we need to do. I see this as a new start for us.” And then they began to outline the next steps they could take.

This couple didn’t need a few dollars. They needed an opportunity to envision their next step in life. In a similar way, the man at the Beautiful Gate needed more than a few coins; he needed someone to help him figure out his next step. Peter offered, “In the name of Jesus, get up and walk.” The man began walking and leaping with joy, for they offered the healing he needed to take the next step.

Healing does take place, even for a couple who have been married for 70 years and discovered they had the coronavirus. At the ages of 88 and 90, Dolores and Louis Amen were at risk due to their age and underlying conditions, and when the

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medical director heard of their situation, he said, “As soon as I heard that they were around 90 years old, I was pretty worried about them.” He soon discovered they seemed much younger than their age. The hospital arranged to have the couple stay together in the same room. The Amens agreed to enroll in a clinical trial for an experimental drug to help lessen the effects of COVID-19, but one of the requirements was not to get pregnant for 28 days. They figured they were safe with that issue. The couple regained their strength and have since returned to their home, where Louis clips roses in his garden and Delores makes tea and oatmeal cookies.²

As a chaplain at the hospital who responds to emergencies in the middle of the night, I have witnessed how doctors can bring healing in situations that seem impossible. In those times when healing of an earthly body doesn't happen, however, I reassure families that God's presence remains with their loved one who takes a step into some mysterious realm after death.

It's so easy to fixate on those situations where healing doesn't go the way we want it to, like focusing on the 192,000 deaths worldwide from the coronavirus. We forget that 751,000 people have healed from the virus.

When the man sitting by the Beautiful Gate found himself healed, did you notice what he did? He went into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God. Due to his prior inability to walk, the man had been cut off from participating in worship in the temple, excluded from a community of fellowship. Not only did he receive physical healing, but he received another form of healing as he entered the place of worship: the healing of community, conversation with others who had also come to worship God.

Today, we may feel like that man sitting beside the gate, longing to enter our place of worship once again. There may be days when you feel unable to walk and leap for joy, for it feels as though we have been stranded in uncharted territory. People often ask me, “When do you think we'll be back together

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in our church building?” No matter how I respond, it’s just a guess. As soon as I think I know how our lives may unfold, the news reminds me that the situation changes day to day, sometimes hour to hour.

The Elders from both our congregations have been meeting virtually every week, and our most recent conversation focused on what church might look like when we’re back in our sanctuaries. We know we’ll need to take precautions of social

distancing, such as roping off every other pew, changing the way we do communion and offering, and avoiding hugs and handshakes. Church will be different. It may feel awkward. And yet, Christ’s healing presence will still be among us. And ejrñ the doors open, that’s a day I look forward to, for I will be ready to enter with you walking and leaping with joy.

¹ <https://clergystuff.com/nl-y2-mark-program-year-peter-heals-in-jerusalem>

² Faith E. Pinho, “Beating coronarvius at 88 and 90: One couple’s story,” The Elkhart Truth, April 25-26, 2020, B4.