

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Rediscover Church: Walking, Leaping, and Praising God”

October 10, 2021 | Rev. Mark Lampley

Our last sermon series, Rediscover Jesus, went through Mark’s Gospel, chapters 1 and 2. Today, we begin a new sermon series, Rediscover Church. We will learn together as we go through the book of Acts, chapters 3-5.

As we launch into this exciting set of stories and sermons in Acts, here is a little background. Luke starts the book of Acts with the dramatic description of Jesus ascending into heaven and then quickly testifies about the promised Holy Spirit coming to the disciples in the Jerusalem upper room! Things for the early Church are going great! Thousands are joining the believers! People are sacrificially giving! They’re praying together, eating together, worshiping together! Having all things in common!

Within the community of the early Church, it’s really good and cozy, and then it’s not. The inner circle of the Church thrives for a while, but it quickly changes as it encounters the world with its pain. The early Church had hardships, doubters, and persecution. No sooner had Peter and John gone to the temple to pray, for example, then they confront a crippled man.

These days, the Church is still having hardships, doubters, and persecution. Like the early Church, we, today, encounter all forms of sickness around us. Last Sunday and today, our Moments for Stewardship addressed this very thing.

Most would agree, the Church faces a world in perilous times! Despair manifests itself in the alarming rise of mental health issues, school shootings, and suicides.

Fear runs rampant, especially with the ruthless COVID variants over-running our lives and the world. We can feel paralyzed when it comes to enough wisdom (or courage) for the right things to do about big issues in front of the Church. Challenges are at every corner: controversies of masking children in schools, immigration issues of who should be allowed into our country, and limitations of national debt our government leaders continue to debate.

We need God’s healing touch to help us know how to Church and to be the Church outside the physical walls of a building.

In preacher Marilyn Borst’s words, from last Sunday’s sermon, the Church needs to *be where there is pain*.

The Church, while good and cozy inside, needs to place itself there to keep being “outwardly focused,” i.e., in the ministry of healing.

The early Church, back centuries ago, teaches us how to do this. It speaks to us now. They tell us that when the world's brokenness is known, engage! The early church would explain that we are the community of faith in Christ, so trust in Jesus' power to do the mission and ministry at hand. Christ's way surpasses any strength or plans of our own.

Even if we don't feel like we, individually or corporately, can do any healing, the important thing about being the Church today is claiming that our sovereign God was at work, is at work, and will always be at work!

The contemporary Church can learn from the early Church that God's healing power changes lives, freeing us to live a joyful life in Christ.

Let's listen to an illustration of God healing of a man from 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.

Many times, when coming to Scripture, we have more questions than clear understanding. Don't feel bad. It's good to be curious, to wrestle together about interpretation, and to prayerfully bring those questions before the Lord. Maybe you have some of the same questions I do, with a text like this.

Does God heal, even if we don't see the physical results? How did this crippled man get that way? Could we be crippled, too? Do we question, like the people in Luke's day, if the crippled man's condition is due to his sin?

I wonder if the crippled beggar had his priorities mixed up and looked for the wrong thing. He went to the temple begging for money. Peter says, I have neither gold nor silver, but in the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk. Maybe the man preferred something of this earth, which is fleeting. We can so quickly get caught up in things of this world instead of heavenly things.

Maybe the man was cutting himself short, not expecting God's touch. Do you expect God's touch?

Maybe his thinking was distorted, at first, as he was eager for short-term gain; but God came near, wanting to give him abundant life, and did good in him. He was transformed to walking, leaping, and praising God!

I contend that his original expectations were too low, but after being *seen* and *experiencing* God, his priorities change!

He began *outside* the temple, but then *went in* and joyfully worshipped. Liberated, he went away a new creation. He rejoiced in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God was making him a new man. God, who lives unbound but chooses to reside inside our hearts, can heal us, too! God can help us in the Church reprioritize our lives!

Imagine if God came near when you were in Jerusalem by the temple that day. Put yourself in the beggar's shoes. And, in the disciples' shoes. I'll confess that I'm like the beggar, often looking for the wrong things, so my priorities get shaded by the world's ways – the fleeting and tangible stuff. Graciously, though, God still comes and mercifully invites me back; helping me to see the long view, the *joy* of my salvation!

I would like to see myself in the early Church followers, Peter and John. They noticed someone hurting in their midst. Wisely, they intently focused on the beggar as a person, an important child of God. They treated him with dignity and love, as all people should be treated. Then, they compassionately and confidently reached out to *touch* him, to extended a hand, and to *walk* with him into the temple. It wasn't their own power or godliness that healed him. It was, of course, the Almighty One.

The Bible records lots of fascinating responses when God comes near. In this story, a heart is filled with lots of joy! Today's Church is wise to learn from the responses in the Old and New Testaments, as well as those God cause in us these days. God can stir all kinds of reactions. You know this to be true. You've likely felt moved by the Spirit at one point or another. That's why a song, poignant silence, scripture verse, or meditating on the cross of our Suffering Servant motivates you to want to clap and say "Amen!" or come down front as some Church traditions do.

Sometimes healing can be in these forms or in the form of, what Romans calls, "transforming by the renewing of your mind." A new insight, if you will. This healing happened to me over the last 18 months.

I preface it by paraphrasing William Shakespeare: Everyone knows how to heal grief, except those who experience it. Lately, I don't claim to know as much about effective healing. I've learned that I have fewer words of comfort than I initially thought.

In searching for pastoral words, though, I've come to find redeeming help in the Psalms; the language of the early Church. Ones like Psalm 77, that cries out not just 1 verse, 2 verses, 3 verses, but on-and-on! Then, it says, I will remember the deeds of the Lord, and essentially *Great is Thy Faithfulness!* The lament Psalms, and 1/3 of the Psalms are laments, give permission to own the pain of our soul and the pain of another.

I've learned two simple, profound points: 1. God can *use others* to help us through healing. You've done just that for me. Thank you! 2. "God's love doesn't protect us *from* suffering, but God's love protects us *in the midst of* suffering." (Hans Kung)

Friends, we in the Church have heard this message of help and hope from above. Let's raise our expectations of God's plan for our lives. The Great Comforter longs to touch our most paralyzing and crippling pain. Settle for nothing less.

But, don't let this balm stop with us. The hurting world drastically needs to hear it, too. Invite others to "look," and give them Jesus.

Who knows, those who hear may be like King David or the crippled man – when God came near, they got up, and walked, and leapt, and praised God!

To God be the glory. Amen.