

Stand Up & Speak Up!
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Acts 3:1-10

Years ago I commuted every day from Wallingford to Greenwich, usually on the Merritt Parkway. The drive was about 60 miles, and the time it took varied greatly depending on the time of day I left. And what I remember most about it (other than the time I wasted), was the man who greeted me and all other commuters as we drove through the "Beautiful Gate" and into town.

The Man seemed to always be there, standing on the curb, with a coffee can and a cardboard sign, saying: "*Homeless Veteran, Please Help*". As people drove by he tried to meet their gaze and make eye contact so that he could ask for some money. Sometimes I gave him a granola bar or a little bit of money if I had some on me. Other times I was able to slip by without notice, head lowered, a bit ashamed of my inability to help, just following the traffic through the green light.

One Monday morning he really got me. My car was stuck at the red light. The Man tapped on my window, looked right at me, shook his can and said, "*Can you give me some change?*" I gave him what I could and asked his name... it was Jim. The light then turned, the cars behind me began to beep their horns, and I went on with my day.

I wish that I had a more powerful ending to the story.

I wonder what would have happened if I said something like: "*I can't give you any change, but in the name of Jesus Christ...you are healed... healed from your PTSD, your grief, your despair.*" He'd probably look at me like some kind of crazy person or a religious nutcase.

But this morning's text has me thinking about our capabilities when it comes to miracles... wouldn't it be amazing if we had the power to do that for another human being?

A long, long time ago another man, born with a severe handicap, was making his living doing just what Jim did. Every morning his family carried him to the outer door of the temple in Jerusalem, called the Beautiful Gate.

His loved ones couldn't repair his problem - but they could place him in a position to be blessed. Those who brought him knew he'd encounter the daily traffic of folks shuffling by on their way to daily prayer. All those years sitting there, begging for coins... this was the only way life he knew.

Those who normally stopped to give him a coin usually looked at him with one of two expressions... pity or disgust. Others would just move by, too busy to see or to care. They were focused on where they were headed, kind of like those religious types who walked by the Samaritan in the story Jesus used to tell.

Peter and John, as they made their way to the Temple, were just expecting to pray. And the beggar was just expecting to beg. But instead on that day, and perhaps this day too, there was a convergence of serendipity. It was a resurrection moment. The thing that he dared not hope for happened. And the Kingdom of God drew just a little bit closer.

It is funny how it sometimes happens that way. The Holy Spirit breaks in during our normal routines, interrupting us when we are doing something else.

A conversation with a friend during a weekly walk brings new inspiration. Cleaning the bathrooms and a new idea hits. Stuck in traffic and we're thinking about someone, and we learn that they need us.

There is a lesson here... within our normal, daily routine there is a possibility for miracles to occur. The Spirit comes as we do what we normally do. Not necessarily when we are in prayer or in some spiritual trance, because sometimes even then we are tempted to be the one in control.

And when the Spirit comes, we are called to channel it's power... we are called to be healing agents. And maybe what that looks like for us now is a little different than what it looked like that day at the Beautiful Gate.

Maybe it looks like a hot loaf of bread delivered to a friend you know who suffers from depression,
or the giving of a prayer shawl to a stranger battling cancer,
or it's a phone call delivering a message of peace and healing,
or it's the welcome you give on Sunday morning to someone the rest of

society has kicked out... THAT is precisely what the Spirit needs and has called forth from you.

Just be ready to offer what you have, do what you do, hold your gifts loosely and know that, when you least expect it – something beyond your expectations will occur. God's kingdom will break in.

For me, following Jesus means we always need to 'see' others as Jesus would, beloved children of God. To be healthy and whole, we need each other. The love of Jesus Christ, the power that we have been given as the church, the Holy Spirit that has been passed down through so many people of faith, allows us to really look at others and even ourselves...

Not with judgment but with love,
Not in condemnation and blame but in mercy and grace,
Not as one who is unworthy, but as one whom God adores,
not as "well, all you need to do is this one more thing to get right with God"
but as "Just as I am, without one plea."

I am telling you, if we treat each other with a love like that (*heck, if you just treat yourself like that!*) there will be amazing acts of power, transformation, and even miracles among us, beyond what we are even able to imagine.

Because let's admit it. Sometimes the things are said by those who claim a Christian identity can sound downright hurtful. How can living by the commandment "*Love one another as I have loved you*¹" lead any of us to thinking we can solve our problems by
Building a wall so high that we keep all those people out,
Or requiring our Islamic citizens to register as such,
Or restricting access to restrooms for God's transgendered children?

Then again, who am I to think that I can speak in the name of Jesus?

And yet... who are we NOT to speak in the name of Jesus for the poor, the forgotten and the looked over?

Who are we NOT to speak in the name of Jesus in compassion for ALL God's children?

Who are we NOT to speak in the name of Jesus as leaders of the church?
And if we do NOT speak up, who will?

¹ John 13:42

Miracles have consequences. Because Peter and John really saw him, this man was healed and followed them into the temple to worship. This meant that the faith community and the one who formerly only received their generosity had to deal with one another in a new way. Walls were torn down and the community was made whole as the one who had been excluded from them gets up and walks and leaps and praises God.

Everything we do together as church should be this joyful. Transformative relationships are how we get there. That's when people really notice and become filled with wonder and amazement. Lives Change. Love Wins. And the kingdom of God breaks in just a little bit more.

It feels to me like every time we baptize someone we presume that the Holy Spirit –
the same Holy Spirit that birthed the church at Pentecost,
the same Holy Spirit that went forth from Jesus and the apostles to do works and signs and wonders,
the same Spirit that gave words to the stumbling and power to the weak and turned everything upside down – is going to be their guide from this moment on.

And our praise of God, our routines and practices, our connection to one another, our sharing of gifts, our openness to one another... all these will leave their marks in our community and our world, as long as the Holy Spirit is around to be our guide.

So for today, and the next day, and the one after that... do not be discouraged by a world that seems so broken. Risk being extravagant in your welcome of those that may not look like you, or sound like you. Keep to the practices of faith. Engage in service for all of God's children and know that important, world shifting things will happen. Amen!