

THE PREACHER AND THE PANHANDLER

Scriptures: Acts 3:1-10

(Peter and John come in front the choir entrance and cross to center stage.)

John: Ah, Peter, do we have to go to the temple again today? We've been there three times this week already. Couldn't we stay home for once?

Peter: We go to the temple to glorify and praise God. That is the purpose for which we were created.

John: But why must we do it in the temple? Even Solomon, when he was building the temple, said that God cannot be contained in a building. I can worship God anywhere ... like in bed.

Peter: Yes, John, you could worship God anywhere. But how often do you? (John shrugs.) Going to the temple is important because it reminds us of the God we are worshipping. The God who sent Jesus is the same God who spoke to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. When we go to the temple we remember that.

John: Oh, all right. I guess I would not mind going to the temple if we did not have to pass by all those beggars sitting around the entrance. Just for once I would like to worship God without people asking for money.

Peter: Don't you think we should help the poor?

John: With what? We don't have anything.

Peter: We have everything we need. We apostles share all our belongings in common.

John: Yeah, but zero times twelve is still zero.

Peter: Well, Jesus never let his financial condition stop him from helping people.

John: But that was Jesus. Jesus could feed 5000 people with five loaves of bread. We're lucky to eat day-old heels.

Peter: Man does not live by bread alone.

John: You're telling me. I'm just tired of being poor. And I'm tired of everyone else being poor. Look at that beggar over there. (He points down the aisle toward the back of the church.) He comes here every day. He can't walk, he can't work, he has to be carried everywhere he goes. He is totally dependent. Why doesn't Jesus do something for him like he did for other lame people?

Peter: Maybe he will.

John: When? The guy has been this way since he was born. How much longer does he have to wait?

Peter: Maybe we should do something for him.

John: Woe, now wait a minute. You know what happens when you try to help beggars. They come back for more and bring their friends. Besides, giving people welfare only makes them more dependent on it.

Peter: You said he was already dependent.

John: He is, but we can't expect to solve all the problems of poverty and dependence in the world. Our job is to preach the gospel, remember? Jesus said, "You shall be my witnesses." He did not say, "You will be my social workers."

Peter: What does it mean to be a witness? What are we supposed to tell people about Jesus?

John: That he is alive, that he saves from sin and death and hopelessness.

Peter: Which brings me back to the beggar. Can you think of anyone more hopeless, anyone more anxious to be saved? Jesus did not come just to save souls. He came to save people. He came to conquer death and disease and dependency—anything that separates us from the life God wants us to have.

John: But even Jesus didn't heal everyone. How does he expect us to? There are thousands of beggars in Jerusalem. We can't help all of them, can we?

Peter: Who said we had to help everyone? People who try to help everyone usually end up helping no one. Jesus told us to start with the people right in front of us.

John (motioning down the aisle): You mean like that beggar? Look at him. He is staring at us like he expects us to give him something.

Peter: Why don't we?

John (exasperated): Because we don't have any money, that's why.

Peter: Maybe we have something better than money.

John: Like what?

Peter: Like the power of new life in Jesus.

John: What are you going to do? Walk up to him and say, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk"?

Peter: Why not?

John: Because it might not work, that's why. Then we will look like idiots. Remember the time you tried to walk on water. Boy was that dumb.

Peter: I do not claim to control God's power. But I do think we should tell people about it and show people what it looks like.

John: You really think you can heal this guy?

Peter: Not me, Jesus.

John: So what are we supposed to do?

Peter: Let's tell the man about Jesus and help him to his feet. Come on, help me lift him up.

John: Wait a minute. You mean I have to touch him.

Peter: Of course you have to touch him. How else do we help him to his feet?

John: But Jesus never had to touch people. He just said, "Get up and walk."

Peter: What are you talking about? Jesus touched people all the time, even people with leprosy. Healing people either physically or spiritually usually involves touching them.

John: And what if he isn't healed? What if we lift him up and he falls down again?

Peter: Then maybe God will show his power in other ways, like through a fellowship of people who care about him, who help him become self-sufficient despite his disability.

John: And what about the next lame man? Or the next blind man? Or the next woman with leprosy?

Peter: John, we are not the Kingdom of God. We are not even pretending that we can solve all the illnesses and injustices of this world. As you said, we are witnesses. Our job is to tell people about Jesus and the new life he came to bring. But part of our witness is to demonstrate in small, imperfect ways how this new life will look. So we lift up this beggar and try to help him to stand, because that is what Jesus came to do for the whole world: to lift us up and help us to stand.

John (pause): You know, it would be easier if we just gave him money.

Peter: Of course. That's why people do it. It is always easier to toss money at people than to touch them, or lift them up, or stand beside them and walk with them as they take their first steps. But Jesus did not toss us money at us. He walked with us and talked with us and shared the complicated problems of our lives. And he wants us to do the same.

John: Sometimes I wonder if this is going to work.

Peter: What do you mean?

John: Sometimes I wonder if anyone will believe that Jesus is really the Savior of the world.

Peter: Why do you believe it?

John: I quit believing it after he died on the cross. For me that was the end of everything he preached, the end of everything he stood for.

Peter: What changed your mind?

John: The same thing that changed your mind: when we saw him alive again. When we saw how God raised him from the dead, we knew that God could do the same for us.

Peter: So why do you doubt whether other people can believe in him?

John: Because they have not seen him like we have. All they have seen is the cross. All they have seen is a world of suffering and death, a world of poor lame beggars. They have not seen the resurrection.

Peter: So we will have to show it to them.

John: How do we do that?

Peter: We show them the power of the living Lord. Don't you see? Even when Jesus healed people he did it as a sign. Remember the lame man who was brought to Jesus on a stretcher. They couldn't get in the house because of the crowd, so they let him down by ropes from the roof of the house, right into Jesus' lap. Jesus healed the man as a sign that he could also forgive sins. He healed a blind man as a sign that he is the light of the world. He raised a widow's son as a sign that he is the resurrection and the life. And when we help this lame man in Jesus' name, we are giving people a sign that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

John: You know, if we start healing people in Jesus' name, the authorities will not be very happy.

Peter: Why?

John: Because they are the ones who put Jesus on the cross, remember? They executed for being a fraud, for claiming to be the Son of God. And now we are going around saying that he is alive and healing people. They are not going to like that.

Peter (shrugging): Sometimes we have to obey God rather than people.

John: But do we have to do it in public, where they will find out about it and arrest us? If you really want to do something for the lame man, let's do it quietly so that no one finds out.

Peter: Then it won't be a witness.

John: How about if we leave a note? "This man was healed by the masked apostles."

Peter: Did Jesus just leave a note?

John: No, but Jesus got crucified.

Peter: And raised from the dead, remember? Don't be afraid, John. If God is for us, who can be against us?

John: I can think of a lot of people.

Peter: Well it does not matter. We are not responsible for what other people think or decide about Jesus. We are responsible to tell them about him. And to give them glimpses of what he can do in their lives.

John: You make going to the temple sound easy by comparison.

Peter: No one said following Jesus is easy, only ... interesting. (Puts his arm around John)
Come on, let's go to worship, and along the way we'll see what we can do for the lame man, and for others like him.

- Ken Onstot
March 15, 2009