

“From Beggar to Witness”
(A Dramatic Sermon)
Acts 3:1-19
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
April 15, 2018

(enter singing) “Come ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore; Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity, love, and power.”

Do you know what it feels like to have to beg? I mean, do you have any earthly idea what it feels like deep down? I hear people talk about it all the time, talk about how it must feel. I hear people talk about trying to put themselves in someone else’s shoes. But what if someone else has no shoes? How can you even begin to imagine how it feels?

I know... I know exactly how it feels... because I spent a lifetime begging. I had no choice because I was born lame. I couldn’t walk, couldn’t work, couldn’t do much of anything for myself. Poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore... that was me. I guess I was a sinner too, like everyone else...

Anyway, it didn’t seem to matter how much anybody else looked down on me, I looked down on myself more. I don’t know whether people blamed me, but I felt so much guilt and shame at my existence that it didn’t matter. In fact, I don’t know which was worse – the pity or the blame? Neither left me feeling whole. Neither left me feeling like a full human being. I was just part of a person really...

But I could see it in their eyes... how they felt about me... just like the people who beg on your streets, downtown, at the stoplights, wherever, they see it in your eyes. You try not to look because if you establish eye contact, that might lead to giving them something, and you don’t want that and maybe for good reason. There are safety concerns and handing out cash in your day is a precarious venture.

But the real issue is that looking may lead to giving. I mean, this same reality applies to the Girl Scouts selling cookies at the grocery store or the Salvation Army people ringing their bells at Christmas... If

you even look, you may be in trouble... So, you try not to look... and if you do, it's a look of pity... or judgment... one or the other... either way in the beggar's heart and soul, your look says it all...

So, that's how I felt all those years, and that's how I felt that fateful day when two men named Peter and John came into the temple. I was lying down near an entrance called the Beautiful Gate because of its polished bronze and silver and gold ornaments. I always wondered why they had to spend so much on things like that which hardly anyone ever noticed except a poor lame man like me, but that's where I was because that's where the people who carried me put me down. The hope was that maybe those who came to worship would be moved to help a poor cripple (acting excessively feeble)... I was weak and needy, you know. What was the harm in playing it up a bit, in putting my best foot forward, or my worst as the case was? But they were both pretty bad.

Anyway... I did "O.K." most days, people would glance down, look away and perhaps toss something in my basket... but this day, these two men looked at me intensely, and I wanted to look away... I wasn't accustomed to this. What was wrong? Were they going to have me thrown out? But as I tried to turn my eyes, one of them, Peter I think, said, "Look at us." So, I looked, intently. I suppose I looked like I was expecting to receive something, and a part of me hoped, but deep down I just didn't know. Maybe I was going to be thrown out.

But as I looked, 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." Now, I have to tell you, a lot of things were running through my mind... running, only in my mind could things run... But I thought, "He can't make me walk!" and I wondered, "Who is Jesus Christ of Nazareth?" And since since I was in the dark about these things, I wondered whether I had a choice – silver and gold or stand up and walk? I mean, he could have given me choice between these two and said, "On the one hand, we give you an undisclosed amount of silver and gold or we will offer you the deal of a lifetime, to be able to stand up and walk. So, Mr. beggar, sir, what is it? Deal or no deal?"

But alas, he did not offer me a choice. He just said, "Stand up and walk," and he took my hand, and before I could say Benny Hinn, my

ankles and feet grew strong, I stood and I walked. In fact, I started jumping up and down and praising God and walked with my new friends right into that temple where I was not welcome before because, well I was a cripple and thus a sinner, a really bad sinner. People then believed that weaknesses like mine were a sign of God's judgment for sin.

Anyway, whatever they thought, I could walk, I was well now, I had a chance to become whole now... I just couldn't contain myself. So, the very first day I walked, I also danced... and shouted... and sang (singing "If you want to help me Jesus it's alright!").

Whew, what a day! If ever I questioned Peter and John's ability to keep their word, I questioned no more. I could walk, I was healed. And if ever I wondered who this Jesus Christ of Nazareth was, I knew now. Somehow, he was the reason I had a life, a full and rich life...

And because he was, because of that day, I am the one who gives alms now, and I spend most of my time telling others about the people who made me well – Peter and John and, most of all, Jesus Christ of Nazareth! I tell everyone everywhere I go, I just can't help myself, though maybe I shouldn't have made such a big deal about things right there in the temple. I think I got those guys in trouble...

Anyway, the important thing here is that I have gone from being a beggar to being a witness in one day and there is nothing any more wonderful and powerful and obnoxious than a transformed beggar talking about how his life changed, who helped him and why it is important to help others. But I do it anyway! I can't help myself!

So, what does all of this have to do with you? Maybe you can learn to see beggars in a different light, look them in the eye and with the full respect a human being is due. Not all of them are lame from birth. So, you may be tempted to judge in some cases, but just remember that none of us ever knows the whole story of another person's life. None of us is worthy to judge.

There is an old story about a woman in India who was furious with a servant who was late for work on a day she had guests coming. She needed her front steps swept off. Where had he been?! The man apologized, saying his young child had died and he had to bury him that

day. Suddenly, she felt horrible. She hadn't known. But we never know all there is to know about another person, what they have been through. We're better off leaving judgment to God.

Maybe you can learn to see beggars in a different light and maybe you can begin to think about some ways you might help them beyond what you are already doing. I know you help with clothing and food for school children on weekends. I know you provide space for job training and support groups. I know you help build houses and house families in transition right here, a couple of weeks a year.

You do many good things as a church, but could you do more not only as a church, but as individuals? Could you think about ways of empowering people to help themselves? That's what Peter, John and Jesus did for me. You know that old saying about giving a man a fish and feeding him for a day versus teaching him how to fish and feeding him for a lifetime. It's cliché, but it's still true.

But the main thing I want to say is this. You are more like me than you think. Your story is like mine whether you realize it or not. You are a beggar too. Your life is broken, incomplete, less than whole until the God who was in Jesus Christ of Nazareth comes and makes you whole. If you haven't come clean with this reality and sought healing, maybe it's time to 'fess up. Maybe it's time do some begging.

There are many different ways to be broken. It's not just the sick and poor who need help. It's the abused and addicted, the selfish and proud; even the rich and privileged can be eaten up with loneliness. Money doesn't make your life miserable all by itself, but nor does it give your life meaning. Beggars come in all shapes and sizes and with all sorts of portfolios. We're all broken in some way, but we don't have to stay broken. Jesus Christ of Nazareth offers us healing and wholeness.

If you know this already, if your life is full, you realize you didn't get here by yourself. Jesus healed you of something. God blessed you with family and friends, people who care about you; with work to give your life meaning and financial resources; with the knowledge that there is a God and so much abundance in a world with so much need.

Knowing all this, don't you feel thankful? Don't you feel like jumping up and down, screaming and shouting and giving thanks to

God? Don't you find yourself wanting to help others and longing to tell them about this Jesus who made you whole? No one has to pressure you to do any of these things. You just do them because of what you have experienced. All of us are beggars at some point. All of us are wounded and broken until God makes us whole. When God does, we want to tell the whole world about it and give back something by helping others.

So, I have two messages for you good people today. If you feel like a beggar, if you feel broken and beaten down, drained of dignity and worth, don't give up hope. Help is available. The Spirit that was alive in Jesus can come alive in you and make you whole and full of life. Just stand up and walk. Embrace that Spirit. Allow the Christ to help you.

If, on the other hand, you have been made whole, if God has helped you already, then why aren't you singing and dancing and pouring out your life for others? You have been transformed from a beggar into a witness. It's time to start bearing witness and sharing more with others, sharing your time and your energy, your life and your money, your first and best, not your leftovers, your first and best!

(exit singing) "Come ye sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore; Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity, love, and power. I will arise and go to Jesus, he will embrace me in his arms. In the arms of my dear Savior, oh there are ten thousand charms."