

“A Little Disappointment Will Bring Great Things”

Acts 3:1-10

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Thank you so much for having me here this morning. It truly is an honor to come and preach for you all, and it's truly an honor to be considered for the position of your next youth pastor. I have to admit that preaching under these circumstances is a new experience for me, because in the Southern part of our denomination, where my last call was, candidates are not required to preach right before a congregational vote. I'm not sure about the history behind that divergence, but I can take comfort in knowing that this is probably the closest experience I will ever have to being a contestant on American Idol. That was a joke, and there should be some more in this sermon, so please feel free to laugh.

But, in lieu of rolling right into a heady and dense sermon, I thought I might tell a story. Does that sound fair? I enjoy telling stories and I've found that sometimes a good story can teach us more than just a list of facts. The writers of the Bible certainly loved to tell stories, and so much of the richness of the Scriptures comes from its narratives. I'd like to share a story from my summer as a hospital chaplain. Many denominations require their seminarians to do a summer of Clinical Pastoral Education, CPE, where they work as a chaplain in some sort of a medical facility, being monitored and mentored by an experienced pastor or chaplain. So I spent the summer of 2004 at the University of Colorado Hospital in Denver. Now because of the timing of my MDiv degree program, I actually did my CPE the summer right after my graduation from Princeton Seminary. I thought that was a real advantage because I went into the program just overflowing with wisdom and knowledge and insight, the kind that anyone has right after a graduation. I had a piece of paper that certified that I was incredibly wise! Heck, my diploma was written in Latin, which had to mean I could give insight on any situation.

Within about ten minutes of my first day at the hospital, learning about all the different wings of the facility and all the different ailments of the people we'd meet, I realized that I was way out of my depth. Granted, anyone who starts a CPE is supposed to feel that way, but I was downright frightened! I had personally never spent a night in the hospital, I'd never had any major

sickness or disability, and I'd certainly never seen a dead body. I'm a youth pastor, and my area of expertise is in working with young people and talking about video games and popular music. And now I was being tasked to meet patients and families in horrendous situations and confidently and calmly represent our Lord and Creator. I was frightened.

There were three other CPE students on the pastoral team. We split up the wings of the hospital, so I made daily visits to the orthopedic wing. I saw lots of broken hips, knee replacements and prolonged shoulder surgeries. On a normal morning I would check in with the supervisor and other students and then head to my wing to make visits to patients, usually uninvited visits. Every day there were new patients on the floor, so every day I would meet someone for the first time. There was no particular task for the chaplains, no particular goal or accomplishment that would allow us to say "I was a successful chaplain today." Really, we just walked into people's rooms, uninvited, and would offer our pastoral services, whatever that meant. Now I would say that for the most part, people were pretty nice. If they didn't want to talk to me they'd politely say there were doing just fine and smile and then look back to the TV. Some people, who obviously didn't want to talk, would allow me to talk to them for a few minutes, just so they wouldn't seem rude. But far too often, I would walk into a room, introduce myself as the chaplain, and get a very gruff dismissal of my services. When entering a room, I would normally ask people if there was anything I could do for them. And the sarcastic and grouchy people would say something like "Well, can you get rid of this pain I'm in?" And sadly I'd have to say, "No, that's what the doctor is trying to do." Some patients would even say, "Well then, you can't really do anything for me, can you?" And I would sadly have to say, "Well, I guess not."

After many encounters like this, I really did start to think about what was the point of my being here? What exactly am I trying to offer to these patients? I'm a theologian, not a doctor, and these people are obviously here for medical reasons. In a way, I felt like a door-to-door salesman who would say "ma'am, I'd like to tell you about this revolutionary set of knives that will solve all of your kitchen problems," and the woman at the door would say "those look like great knives, but right now my house is on fire and I'm trying to get my children out." The immediate needs of the patients were something that I was not equipped to treat. Internal bleeding and severe pain seem to

take precedence over instruction in proper Reformed hermeneutical practices. So for many weeks I roamed the halls of the hospital trying to figure out why exactly I was there.

Hold that thought for a minute, and let's turn to our scripture passage for today. It's the beginning chapters of Acts and the new Christian Church is really starting to take off. There are lots of new converts and the new Christians are enjoying a communal life together, led by the Holy Spirit. In our passage, Peter and John are headed up to the temple to pray when they come across a crippled man sitting at the gate, begging for money. That's all he wants, some money so that he can get through the day, something small from someone more fortunate than himself. So obviously he asks Peter and John for money and that moves a reader to ask "what's an apostle supposed to do in a situation like that?" Should he give the man some money and then be on his way? Or just tell the man, "Sorry, I don't have any money?" Peter, however, looks at the man, who is expecting something nice, and says, "No, they don't have any money for him, but they have something better." Peter, through the power of the name of Jesus, commands the man to stand up and walk. And the man does, immediately. He's made whole and strong. The man follows Peter and John into the temple and he's not just walking with them, the text says that he's leaping, leaping and praising God. How great is that. Just minutes ago he was crippled, begging for money, just hoping to get enough to get by, and now he's healed and leaping! Peter, through the power of Christ, gave the man more than just money, more than what he asked for and more than he ever would have expected. Peter gave the man the opportunity to live a better life, one that the man never would have thought possible.

Here in this passage we see what the gospel does to people. We see how the gospel can transform in ways that we would never expect. And if we look at this passage from the mindset of a first century reader, we see that this miracle is more than just a healing. This isn't a fancy magic trick. At the time of the writing of Acts, the medical world was obviously a long ways from what we know now. Today we know that a person who is born crippled might have a genetic disorder or birth defects or a whole host of understandable ailments. Healing just requires the right treatment to overcome those ailments. In the first century mind, disabilities acquired at birth were not so easy to explain, so people held a more mystical view. It was widely believed in folk

theology that a person was born with an ailment because their parents had sinned. The sin of the parent was being passed onto the child. That was the only logical explanation at the time. A parent did something wrong and their child was punished. So to the original audience of Acts, this act of healing was more than just a medical miracle. It was an upheaval of the whole system. A healing was destroying sin, bringing wholeness and leading to a complete life. A healing upended the whole flawed theological framework and changed the whole view of the universe.

So this passage shows that it's important to remember that the Christian community is not just about charitable handouts. The purpose of the Christian community is to change lives, to overturn sinful structures, to bring wholeness and newness to people through the name of Christ. The man who was born crippled was only asking for some money, just enough to get by. His encounter with Peter, a representative of Jesus Christ, didn't yield just some financial gains but rather a whole change in his life, one that he would never have even thought to ask for. That's the power of God working through the community of believers.

So, getting back to my story about my work at the hospital, it took me almost the whole summer before I realized that my job as a chaplain was not the same job as the doctors. In fact, my work was almost entirely different. After meditating on this very same passage, and having long talks with my supervisor, who was in fact much wiser than me, despite the fact that I had a diploma written in Latin, I realized that hospital chaplains are called to offer something beyond just a physical healing. A chaplain should offer the presence of Christ, offer the gospel, the good news. Because once the good news works its way into your life, you're changed in a way you would never think possible. And that's what every member of the community of believers should offer to the world, the opportunity to know Christ, to know the creator of the universe who can make a hip replacement look like a minor inconvenience.

And as I look toward my vocation as a youth pastor, I see how necessary it is to look beyond the immediate needs and look rather at how the gospel can cause a complete transformation. Multiple times in the past I've had parents come up to me and say "Erik, my son has the most vulgar mouth. It seems that almost every other word he says is a curse word. It's just so terrible. I'm going to bring him to youth group every single week because I want you to fix

him." And my response is always, "Well, I'm glad you're going to bring him to youth group every week, but I have no idea how to fix your son's potty mouth." Because truly, I don't have any idea how to do that. As I see it, I could go up to the youth and say "Uh, dude, you need to stop swearing so much, because, uh, it's not cool." And more likely than not that youth with the potty mouth would turn to me and say, "Forget you," but not really say forget, if you know what I mean. What I would tell that parent though is that if they bring their kid to youth group every week, the gospel just might infect their kid's life and bring about a change that is monumentally greater than cleaning up a potty mouth. Yes, God can fix a potty mouth, but God can do so much more. My hope would be that all of you who have youth would pray that God would exceed your wildest dreams in lives of the young people here. That God would bring about miracles that none of us have even thought possible. That God, who healed the crippled man who just wanted some money, would change the lives of the young people here in such a way that they will change the world for God, change the world in a way that we could never envision. Because God is capable of doing that.

What's more, I can pretty much promise that all of you will come across a situation at some point where someone you care about has a serious need, and no matter what your resources and no matter what your skill set, you will have to say "I'm not equipped to meet your need." But in that moment you'll have to remember that you are a representative of the gospel, and that you represent a God who is in fact capable of meeting that person's need and God is in fact capable of doing much, much more for that person. So your duty will be to figure out how you can best represent the gospel in that situation, and it will probably be more demanding than a pat on the back, saying "there there, Jesus loves you and he'll make everything ok." You'll have to figure how in that situation you can best be God's emissary for the good news, and that's a tricky thing to do. But we can all take comfort in knowing that God is powerful enough to exceed even our deepest needs.

But before I conclude though, I must point out one last little aspect of our scripture story. When Peter first starts talking to the crippled man, the text says that man was "expecting to receive something from them." And I would guess that in that split second, when Peter didn't pull out a big bag of money to hand to the man, the man was disappointed. Granted, that disappointment ended quickly, but when the needs he wanted met weren't immediately met, he

was certainly let down and disappointed. And I would argue that as we work to spread the gospel and work to infect the young people here with the gospel, there will be some waiting periods, where it seems like nothing is happening. And I wouldn't be surprised if people are disappointed at times. God's schedule isn't always our schedule, and that can be frustrating. But when we realize that God has planned for us great things beyond our comprehension, we can be patient and wait through those disappointing times.

So dream big. Once God gets a hold of someone, amazing things happen, and I would encourage all of you to spend this week praying for the young people of this church, praying that the gospel would grab a hold of their lives and transform them in monumental ways. God has big things in store for God's people, so let's invite the Spirit into our midst and let the power of Christ change us all.

Amen.