



## GRACE AT THE GATE

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Happy Mother's Day, all you moms. I hope your families are celebrating you well today. The Bible says it's good and right to honor your parents, so I'm glad we've got a day set aside to do that in a formal way.

Having said that, I find Mother's Day to be a bit anxiety producing when it comes to gifts. Because moms don't generally like people making a fuss over them. So they're not much help when it comes to presents. "You don't have to get me anything." Or, "Oh just make me something. I love getting a card you colored." That's fine when you're seven, but at 41, it's a little odd.

You don't want to be predictable and do all the typical things like flowers and chocolates, but you don't want to NOT do those things. And then there's what to do for your wife and the mother of YOUR children. You can't buy any type of yard tool that secretly want for yourself. I've heard guys say, "She's not MY mother. I don't need to do anything for her." I usually haven't heard them say that two years in a row, though.

I know one mom who just hands her husband a list of what she wants him to buy her, and that's what he gets. No room for disappointment there. But that feels a little too planned. I tend to think that the best gifts are a surprise. Something that she wouldn't have asked for, but that shows you know her really well. Those are the kind of gifts we all like getting.

Our story this morning is about that kind of gift. The person who got it wouldn't have ever thought to ask for it, but it turned out to be the best possible kind of present.

We've been working our way through the book of Acts, and last week we took a slice of life to see what was happening in the early church. We saw that they were a learning church, a loving church, a lifting church and a leading church. In the middle of the text, Luke made the general comment that the apostles were performing many signs and wonders. This morning he gives us a dramatic example of one of those wonders.

### **Acts 3:1-16**

*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer -- at three in the afternoon.*

*Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.*

*When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.*

*Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

*While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.*

They do a really good Mother's Day brunch down at the Cliff House. Salty's does one too. My problem when I go to places like that is knowing where to start. There are so many choices and so much good food that it's almost overwhelming. Almost.

This story is like a really good brunch. So much is happening on so many levels that I almost don't know where to begin. You can look at things through the perspective of Peter and John. You can flip it around and see it through the eyes of the beggar, or even the crowd watching everything. But what kept drawing my attention as I read this story was that Beautiful gate.

The Temple had been rebuilt by Herod the Great, shortly before Jesus' birth. Herod liked to do things on a grand scale, so he made the Temple grounds much larger than Solomon's had been. Picture a space large enough for 35 football fields, or over 1.3 million square feet. It was colossal.

But it wasn't just big – it was flashy. Supposedly it had so much gold and white marble on it that when the sun was shining, you could barely even look at it from miles away without hurting your eyes. It was dazzling.

There were many entrances to the temple grounds, but this one gate in particular stood out. The Jewish historian Josephus was born shortly after Jesus' lifetime, and he's considered a key source of information about life in Judea in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. He actually talks about the temple and this gate in one of his books. He described it this way:

*Now nine of these gates were on every side covered over with gold and silver...but there was one gate that was without the holy house, which was of Corinthian brass, and greatly excelled those that were only covered over with silver and gold. Each gate had two doors, whose height was severally thirty cubits (45 ft.), and their breadth fifteen (approx 22 ft.). Now the magnitudes of the other gates were equal one to another; but that over the Corinthian gate, which opened on the east over against the gate of the holy house itself, was much larger...and it was adorned after a most costly manner, as having much richer and thicker plates of silver and gold upon them than the other.*

In other words, you have this gate that is far and away superior to the others. It is a spectacular entrance to the inner Temple grounds. And in our story today, this gate stands at the center of the action. Everything takes place around it. Luke reminds us twice that this damaged man sat just outside it. Peter and John were passing through it. The crowd gathered out in front of it. It's right where all the paths cross.

And the more I looked at this gate, the more it seemed there was some symbolism going on here.

Jesus once commented to his disciples and said,

**John 10:9**

*I am the gate.*

Jesus is at the center of this story because he IS the beautiful gate. He's the only way into God's kingdom. It's only through him and his work on the cross that we have access to God. Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except through me." And just like in our story, there are people going through that gate, and there are people who are still parked outside it. And our paths cross all the time. Part of the faith experience is learning how to interact with hurting people who are on their own outside the faith, how to speak into their lives about Jesus, how to bring healing and hope so they too can go walking and leaping through the gate.

Peter and John had chosen to worship God that afternoon. That's what they were on their way to do. It would have been easy for them to barrel into the Temple without stopping, because they had an important task to accomplish. They were there to pray! They were there to worship! They could have seen this man as nothing but an interruption or nuisance. But they didn't. They stopped and ministered to him, and that became the most significant piece of their worship that day.

Sometimes we operate as if our feelings toward God are separate from our treatment of other people. But the worship of Christ and the work of Christ go hand in hand. We need to **see the people in our path.**

Sara Tucholsky is a senior at Western Oregon and a member of the girls softball team. She had never hit a home run in her career, and was having a particularly low hit season, when she got to a game against Central last month.

When she got up to bat, the first pitch came. She swung and missed. The crowd was heckling her. Then came the second pitch. And she knocked it out of the ballpark. It was the hit of a lifetime. She took off running toward first base, and on her way there, she tore a ligament in her knee and went down flat. She was in so much pain she couldn't get up and complete her run.

Her first base coach just felt sick, because she knew if they touched her or tried to help her, her run wouldn't count, and this was something she'd waited for her whole life. The umpire came out on the field and said according to the rules, what they would need to do instead was put a pinch runner on for her at first base, but it wouldn't count as a home run.

Then one of the players from the other team came up to the umpire and said, "What if we carry her?" There was nothing in the rules against the opposing team helping out in a situation like this. So two of Central Washington's players carried Sara from base to base, letting her good leg touch each one so that the run counted.

It was an unprecedented show of kindness in competitive sports. The players were able to get past their immediate objective of winning to see the humanity of this player on the other team, and they reached out in a way that will be remembered far longer than the final score of the game.

I read an article this week that said we need to quit thinking in terms of "me and God" and start thinking about "us and God." Who is on your path? God has placed all kinds of people just outside the gate. We can't move on to worship without walking past them

Take a look at this picture from Taiwan. It's kind of surreal. Minnie Mouse clowning it up. People going about their business, smiling and talking. Nobody even notices the beggar on the ground, flat on his face. Nobody is even acknowledging this blatant cry for help.

We can be blind to all the hurt that is right in front of us. We can be very task oriented.

One of the things I appreciate so much about the way Jesus worked is that he never treated people as a distraction from his ministry – they WERE his ministry. When he was in a hurry to get to the home of Jairus to heal his daughter, he still took time to stop for the widow who pulled on him. He made time for blind Bartimaeus. He made time for Zaccheus. All these people who seemed to be peripheral he treated as central.

As the church, we are continuing Christ's mission, and it was Jesus who said,

**Matthew 25:40**

*Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me — you did it to me.*

Who are the overlooked and ignored people in your life? It's not just the extreme and obvious hurting people like the man in the story. It's the fringe people in your world who are going through it. God can do great things through the incidental relationships you haven't even been thinking about. I was talking with somebody who had a great spiritual discussion with the person giving her a manicure. Then wouldn't you know it, a few days later, somebody else from church had an appointment with the same person and was able to continue the conversation.

I was talking with two other people who each have developed friendships with different cashiers at the grocery store who have been going through a hard time. They've been able to pray with them and invite them to a Bible study.

Part of that is personality. Not all of us are that outgoing when it comes to striking up conversations with strangers. God knows that, and he knows there are a lot of people outside the gate who aren't very outgoing either. He's not asking that we become more aggressive – he's asking that we become more aware. As he opens our eyes to the needs around us he will also open our eyes to how we can help, given who we are.

**Recognizing the real need**

When the man in our story asked Peter for money, Peter initially turned him down and said, "I've got something better for you." The man was probably thinking, "Yeah, right. I bet it's one of those tracts that looks like a folded up 20 until you open it up and it says, "Here's a tip." He had probably resigned himself to the fact that Peter was going to just give him some good advice.

But Peter knew that what this man needed wasn't a handout. And it wasn't some vague blessing or good wishes. He needed to be healed up and restored to the person God had made him to be. He needed to be able to walk so he could go through that Beautiful Gate and worship God. That was the real need. Money was just what the man was asking for on the surface. Peter saw past that to what was really going on.

Chuck Kraft, a professor of anthropology, has written, "We cannot take it for granted that the problem presented by the person is the main issue."

Financial counselors will often say that money problems are just symptoms of deeper issues. The same is usually true with eating disorders and addictions. The visible signs are often just that – signs of something far more painful below the surface.

It would have been much simpler for Peter to just toss a few coins to the man and move on. As soon as he gets involved, the issue becomes much bigger and more time consuming. Luke says the man just clung to Peter and John afterwards. The whole crowd wanted an explanation. Digging deeper with people is costly and requires more from us. But if we truly want to minister to their real needs, that's what it takes. As we do that, sometimes what we discover is that the real need is within us. God often uses us in someone else's life to change something inside our own hearts.

Timothy Eakin attends Rock Harbor Church in Costa Mesa, California. That church has an outreach to homeless people in Long Beach, and Timothy decided to help out with that ministry last summer. Over 100 people packed a small chapel for dinner, and the temperature was going up and up as the crowd grew. He was fed up with it and muttered, "It's getting ridiculously hot in here."

The homeless man next to him said, "Try to think of a cool place. That's what I do. Then it's not so hot." His name was Jimmy Johnson, and he began to tell Timothy all about his life, about his time in prison, how he had just put his faith in Jesus two weeks ago and how he was trying to quit using and selling drugs.

Timothy wrote, "Everything I thought I would bring to the table was crushed in that first hour. As I talked with Jimmy Johnson, I saw a face and a story where initially I would only have seen a problem and a statistic...It's easy to throw quick fixes at a problem and just walk away. Maybe the road less traveled is to meet these people where they're at. For me, just talking to them taught me more about Jesus – why He came and why He spent time with the people He did. The point isn't to solve the community. It's to enter into it. If for no other reason than to hear the untold stories."

What are the untold stories that need drawing out? To speak into people's lives will mean listening to the deeper needs as God reveals them in their lives and our own.

When Peter got to the true need of this man, Luke says this:

*Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!"*

He looked intently at him, and asked the man to look back at him. In other words, Peter got eye to eye with the beggar, the way you would somebody you see as being on your level – not beneath you. He treated him like a person of equal worth.

I love it that this miracle is happening through Peter. The man who just a few weeks earlier had denied knowing Jesus. He did the one thing he swore he never would: he sold out on his best friend because he was too afraid, and his friend knew it. How would you like living with that? Peter knew what it was like to hit rock bottom, because that had crippled his spirit. He had sat down outside the gate himself, unable to do anything about his own situation. But Jesus had reached out to him and restored him. And now here he was, able to help somebody else with Christ's own power and grace.

Peter knew that there was nothing special about him -- he was no different from the man he was reaching out to.

Martin Luther wrote many incredible things that changed the church forever during the Reformation. He is arguably one of the most important figures in Christianity since the apostles. But in 1546, just before he died, he wrote his very last words. If I were him, my last words would probably have been something like, "Remember all I've taught you!" or "Keep fighting the fight!" Instead, the very last words he ever wrote were: "We are all beggars. This is true." An incredible insight for such an influential man.

The only way we can effectively reach out to others is if we see that we are all beggars and there is no difference between us and anyone else. We are all crippled and deformed and powerless until we encounter the transforming power of God's grace.

Peter doesn't claim to have any special gifts or abilities to meet those deeper needs that he uncovers. In fact he goes out of his way to say what he DOESN'T have – silver and gold. All he has going for him is the power of the name of Christ. The miracle only happened because of Jesus.

Thomas Aquinas is said to have gone to visit Pope Innocent II back in the 1200s. The pope was counting out a pile of money and he commented, "See Thomas – the church can no longer say, 'Silver and gold have I none.'"

Thomas replied, "True. But neither can she say, 'Rise up and walk.'"

When we're self-sufficient, we lose our dependency on Christ. When we lose that, we lose whatever ability we have to truly impact lives. Anything you or I can give is just a band-aid without Christ.

Are you begging God for silver and gold? He wants to do such bigger things for you

### **Naming Jesus**

All the church has to offer is the name of Jesus. There's nothing else. We can't be ashamed to speak it loudly and often, because as Peter said earlier in Acts, "There is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved."

It's not that saying the name Jesus is a magic formula to get what you want. But when his followers speak his name in faith, it carries the same force as if Jesus were physically present. All of heaven is brought to bear on earth to carry out God's will. And that is as true today as it was 2000 years ago.

Do we really hear that? There is no reason why God can't act with the same astonishing power that he did back then. He is still in the business of scooping up the people outside the gate and setting them back on their feet. He's still in the business of restoring lives and healing the brokenhearted. Jesus said this:

### **John 14:12-14**

*The person who trusts me will not only do what I'm doing but even greater things, because I, on my way to the Father, am giving you the same work to do that I've been doing. You can count on it. From now on, whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I'll do it. That's how the Father will be seen for who he is in the Son. I mean it. Whatever you request in this way, I'll do.*

Incredible words. Do we believe them? When we ask for something in line with Jesus' character and ministry, he says he will answer our prayer.

That brings us to our final point this morning, which is **taking a bold risk**

John Wimber once said that faith is spelled R-I-S-K. If it didn't, it really wouldn't be faith. It would be routine or habit. Faith is bold! Peter risked being a huge disappointment to the man if he raised his hopes only to have God do nothing. What if it didn't work? He risked embarrassing himself and giving Christianity a bad reputation. Yet he had such confidence in God that he made the bold request.

What keeps us from taking risks in our faith? Often it is those same fears. We don't want to be disappointed. If we don't ask, then we don't get our hopes up and we don't have to struggle with a "no" answer. Have you ever been reluctant to pray for someone's serious need, because you were worried how it would affect their faith if God didn't answer? It's sometimes easier to just not ask.

And we don't want to be embarrassed. It feels silly to ask for something and then not have it come true, as if we had written a letter to Santa Claus asking for an impossible gift. Sometimes we're not just concerned about God's reputation – we're worried about our own, and we hate looking foolish.

But if we worship the God of the Bible, if we want to see him do incredible things in our community, then we need to believe he can. We deny ourselves so many opportunities to experience God's greatness and resources because we're afraid to take the bold risks in our faith and ask him for the big things. James put it this way:

### **James 4:2**

*You do not have because you do not ask God.*

We know that God doesn't answer prayers based on selfishness. He doesn't answer greedy requests. And he doesn't always answer those where we're asking to escape pain. Even Jesus' prayer in the garden before he died, where he said, "If it's possible, take this cup from me," wasn't granted. If a request violates God's plan and purpose, he will not give us what we're asking.

And I'm not suggesting that if we just have more faith, God will do our bidding. He's not going to step in and cure every disease. Peter didn't heal all the beggars that day. We're setting ourselves up for disappointment if that's our understanding.

Beth Moore says that when our prayers leave us feeling disappointed with God, one of three things has happened. Either we misinterpreted a promise from God, or we missed the answer or we gave up before God timed his response. But God is still very much in the business of responding when his people get on their knees and pray.

So what are the big, bold things we can ask for? We know God loves justice. We know he is close to the brokenhearted. We know he's ready to help those who ask for wisdom. We know he delights in giving good gifts to his children. And we know he wants to bring people through the gate into a place where they can praise him.

When God acts in miraculous ways, it is not just to heal the person or fix a problem – he is providing a reason for people to give him glory and praise. Anything that results in people recognizing God's greatness more fully is worth asking him to do.

The risk for Peter was not just asking God to answer, but also getting involved personally with the beggar. Thomas Walker once said, "The power was Christ's, but the hand was Peter's."

What bold risks does God have in mind for New Day? Will you pray for our church? I want to do something a little bold right now. Before we finish up here I want to just pause and take a couple minutes and ask that a few of you just shout out a sentence prayer that God will help us as a body to be aware of the needs around us and bold to step out in faith to meet them.

What bold risks does he have in mind for you? Maybe it is forgiving somebody who hasn't changed yet. Maybe it's confessing something nobody even knows about. Maybe it is setting a healthy boundary so you can hear the voice of God and not a voice of guilt and fear and lies. Maybe it's praying every day with or for your spouse. Maybe it's asking God to give you the opportunity to tell someone about Jesus, then asking him for the courage to do it and then asking him to give you the very words to say. Maybe it's being bold enough to ask for help understanding who Jesus is. Faith means taking bold risks. We want to be the kind of church that is filled with awe at what God is doing. We want to experience him in a real and fresh way. Like our vision statement says, we want to be a community that demonstrates the power of the gospel and the reality of God's kingdom.

We're all beggars. This is true. Beggars who have been changed. Beggars who have been adopted and made part of the family. Beggars who can now walk and leap and tell other beggars how beautiful the gate is from the other side.

Ask God to give you boldness this morning, to stretch your faith to do the risky thing.

Will Rogers once said, “Why not go out on a limb? That’s where the fruit is.”

Let’s go out on a limb for God and reap the harvest he has waiting just outside the gate.