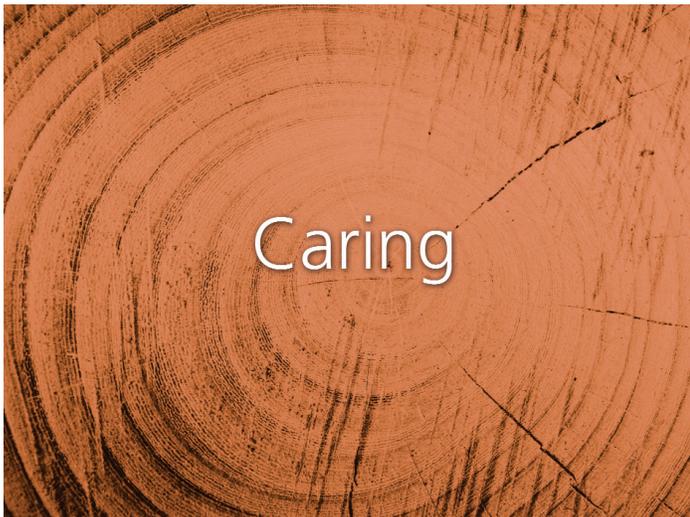


Small Group Discussion ?

ACT IN | CARING
JULY 25-26, 2015 | ACTS 3:1-10

Dear God, help us work together. Amen.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But 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." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.



Imagine this story through the lame man's eyes ...

You can't walk. Perhaps you've never taken a step in your life, and you've missed everything that comes with mobility: running, dancing, traveling, exploring, doing. Your friends bring you to this gate so you can sit and beg for money. It's been like this every day, and will probably continue to be like this until you die. You don't expect things to change.

How does that feel? What is it like to experience that affliction? Are there situations in your life that feel like they'll never change, never be redeemed? Wrongs that will never be righted? Losses that can't be reversed? Physical injuries or illnesses that can't be fixed? Are there holes in your life that can't be filled? In what ways are you like this man?

Note that the man in this story does not ask for healing. He asks only for money. Has he given up all hope of healing and wholeness? Have you? What is it like to have no hope? Is your deepest hope outside of God's reach? Is it dangerous to believe that your life can be turned around? Does faith actually set us up for profound disappointment? Why, or why not?

Is this story plausible?

When you experience unimaginable heartbreak, does this story seem like a fairy tale? Does God heal people like this in real life? Can God's disciples really perform these kinds of miracles? Did the ancient disciples have a gift for healing that we lack today? Do you think they ever tried to heal someone and failed? Is it a good idea to promise anyone this kind of healing? Is it false hope? Does it sound like magic and pixie dust?

What does it mean that some illness is healed and some is not, that some families stay together and some are torn apart, that some people are fulfilled and some are not? When we say things like, "God will heal you, in God's way and in God's time," is that a truth or a cop-out? Are we making it up? Are we rationalizing and making excuses for a God who feels absent?

What is God like in our suffering? Is God reliable? Will God heal everyone? How? What can we proclaim about this God?

What hope does this story bring us today?

Why do we still tell this story? What does it reveal about God now, in our time? How does God speak into your dark moments, emptiness, loss, and illness? Is there hope for you?

What is your response to God? Do you sing and dance and worship, like the once-lame man in this story, when you find healing? Do you rejoice and give thanks? Do you live your life in testimony to the one who heals? Do you even recognize the healing and its source? Or are you still waiting to be healed?

IN through community

Imagine this story through the friends' eyes ...

You have a friend who can't walk, and can't provide for himself. You know he'll starve on his own, so you carry him to the gate each day to beg for money.

Why do the man's friends do this? Are they trying to do a good deed? Are they trying to change this man's beliefs or behavior, to somehow "convert" him? Are they trying to fix him? Or are they simply doing for him what he cannot do for himself: bringing him to the gate in hopes of scrounging enough money to live another day?

Do these friends expect the lame man to be healed? Do they believe in magic? Do they know the disciples will walk by? Do they strive for the disciples' attention, or God's? Do you think they have any idea what's going to happen next?

Do you think these friends are amazed to realize what an enormous difference their simple act made in this man's life? Are we like that, too? Do you think we ever underestimate the powerful, cumulative effects of compassion and kindness?

What does this mean for us today?

"We, as a caring community, are in resurrection mode! All kinds of things we thought were improbable are entirely possible. The caring community steps in and steps up for people who are struggling, waiting, wondering ... and for people who are hurting, crying, searching. The caring community steps in and steps up for people who ache for renovation, revival, and restoration. The caring community steps out of their comfort zone for people who are hoping and praying for someone pick them up. Never underestimate the power of the caring community. This is our starting point." (– from Pastor Paul Gauche's sermon notes)

In your community, who is struggling, waiting or wondering? What do they need? How could you, and your faith community, step in and step up for them?

In your community, who is hurting, crying or searching? What do they need? How could you, and your faith community, step in and step up for them?

In your community, who aches for renovation, revival and restoration? What do they need? How could you, and your faith community, step out of your comfort zone for them?

What does it mean to be a caring community? What does it look like? Does a community like that actually have power? What sort of power? Can a caring community heal others? Can it bring hope and wholeness? How?

OUT for the world

Imagine this story through the disciples' eyes ...

You walk towards the temple and see this lame man by the gate, begging for money. You want to help him. But can you?

What do the disciples think will happen next? Do they know they can heal him? Do they have magical powers? Do they trust that God is present in every interaction, regardless of the outcome? Was the answer different for the disciples thousands of years ago than it is for us today? What can we learn from these disciples that is relevant to our lives now?

What else is at work in this story?

Why is the lame man sitting outside the temple? Is he welcome inside the temple? Is he an outcast? Does anyone notice him? Is this why the writer mentions how intently the disciples look at him? Is it a small miracle that they notice this man at all?

Could this story also be a social commentary about the boundaries and walls we build to keep people out of our neighborhoods, churches, lives and hearts?

"Just say 'no' to a system that perpetuates the myth that there are those who belong and those who do not. In the first century, you weren't welcome in the temple if you were hurting, sick, infirm, disabled, broken, needy, or lame. The brokenness of the first century system didn't allow the man to be part of the community. It limited and confined God to the inside of the temple, making God only for the insiders. It's a broken, hurting, sick, disabled and lame system. The really tough news is that that system still exists today. We do the same thing today." (– from Pastor Paul Gauche's sermon notes)

What do you think of those words? What are the barriers in place right now that keep people out? What separates us?

In this story, Peter and John reject the system that's in place. They step up, in, out and against the system keeping people on the outskirts of life, health and wholeness. They're a caring community in which there's room for everyone, and all the entrances, gates and doors are flung wide open.

How can we emulate that? Look around you, wherever you are. Who is not present? Who is missing? Who doesn't feel welcome, and why? How do we perpetuate that system? How can we stop doing that? How can we fling the doors of our hearts open wider? Who can we invite into this dance of life and faith and joy? What would these disciples' witness look like today?

Could the world "out there" be filled with people who are sitting by a gate, without any hope of healing? How will you step in? Will you spark healing that you never imagined? Is it possible that you, too, can spread wholeness, joy, radiance, aliveness and resurrection? How?