

DETOUR THROUGH ACTS: BEING THE BEGGAR

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

"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.'" Acts 3:6

FAITH STORY:

Acts 3:1-10

FAITH FOCUS:

Peter and John meet a lame man by the Temple gate as they are walking to join other Jews in the afternoon prayer. This man asks them for money, but Peter commands him to look at them. They have something better than money. By the power of the name of Jesus, the lame man's ankles and legs are strengthened. He jumps up and begins praising God as he enters the temple with them. All the people who see this are amazed.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students realize God's abundant grace for undeserving people.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Articulate how temporary material wealth and possessions can be.
- List all the things the lame man did wrong.
- List all the things that Peter and John did.
- Discuss how undeserving the beggar was.
- Draw and picture or write a story about a modern-day beggar.
- Write down the things for which they need help from God.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1** Bibles
- 2** White board and markers, a blackboard and chalk or another medium to post lists.
- 3** Paper and colored pencils for students.
- 4** A gift box with a lid for every student.
- 5** A worship center that may include a small cross, several gift-wrapped packages

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (12 minutes)

Set up a simple game where there are clear winners, such as a race or team competition. Any of these examples would work:

- Rolling a hard-boiled egg across the floor with your nose
- Gunny-sack race
- Three-legged race
- Water balloon toss

As different youth win, hand them a gift-wrapped prize. It should be something very cheap and trivial, such as a pack of gum or a candy bar. Stop the games when about half of the students have won one of these simple gifts. Then give each of the other students a gift-wrapped package. But make sure these presents are more substantial, such as a five-dollar bill or a coupon to a restaurant.

FOCUS, Option 1:

Greet the youth as they come in. Have snacks ready if that's appropriate. Gather them together and ask them to reflect on the best gift they've ever received and why.

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Hopefully, your youth will begin discussing why the students who didn't win got the better prizes. Let this conversation develop naturally; introduce it only if you need to do so. If the students are uneasy about this, don't relieve the tension right away. Simply explain that, as the facilitator of these games, you have the right to give whatever gifts you want.

CONNECT, Option 1:

Ask: How long did this object remain your most treasured possession? Did you deserve what you received? If it isn't your most highly valued possession anymore, what happened to make that change?

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (13–15 minutes)

Ask a volunteer to read the story from Acts 3:1-10 aloud. Then, ask for volunteers to take 5 minutes and prepare to re-enact the story for the rest of the group. Those who don't work on the dramatic sketch will meet to make the following lists on white board:

- List what the beggar did that was good.
- List what the beggar did that was neutral or not good.
- List what Peter and John did.

Bring the two groups back together. Have the first group re-enact the story and then have the second group share the lists. Discuss these questions:

- What, if anything, did the beggar do to deserve the miracle he received?
- Why did Peter and John ask the beggar to look at them? (There is no definitive answer for this. It might be an interesting topic to discuss however.)

Why did the lame man leap and jump and praise God like he did? Why did he follow Peter and John into the Temple?

APPLY: (10–12 minutes)

Ask these questions:

- *Who do you identify with the most in this story and why?*
- *What do you long for the most in your life?*
- *Could it be that, like the beggar, you are asking too little?*
- *Do you hesitate to ask God for something because you feel you don't deserve it? What does this story say to that attitude?*
- *How is God like I was at the beginning of our session tonight, handing out the kind of presents I did?*

Direct the youth to draw a picture or write a story of a present-day beggar. This could be a real beggar or something more symbolic. Try to help them get at those needs we may have today that we don't know how to ask for. What does this beggar ask for? What does God give him instead?

RESPOND: (10–12 minutes)

Say, "We are all beggars. We all are completely dependent on God. We can't heal ourselves. We might not be physically lame, but we are crippled by sin, by fear, by addictions and many other things. And there's nothing we can do about our sorry state. But we can accept God's grace and healing in our lives. Even if we don't know how to ask for it in the right way, God is there, wanting to heal us."

Give each student a gift box that has a lid and one sheet of paper. Instruct them to write what they really need from God on the piece of paper. Then they are to place the paper in the gift, close the lid and place it at your worship center. Close with a song and prayer together.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

The first chapters of Acts nearly burst off the pages with action and excitement. Our story from Acts 3 needs to be read and understood in the context of the earlier chapters. Luke is painting a detailed picture of the church at its infancy, so each story is best understood in the midst of its literary context.

Acts 1 functions as a "bookend" to the end of Acts. Jesus and disciples begin in Jerusalem. The book ends with Paul in Rome, at this far outpost, spreading the word. Chapter 1 explains this geographical movement. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Luke's narratives follow this pattern without exception.

Another pattern to watch in Acts is the action, reflection, and persecution movement. Many

times the apostles or other believers act. Then Peter or someone else explains the meaning of the action. Many times, but not always, persecution follows. Our story is the action. When a crowd gathers in wonder at the miracle, Peter takes the opportunity to reflect and preach the good news. Then Peter and John are brought before the authorities.

In chapter 2, the Holy Spirit comes as Jesus promised. A great wind and tongues of fire come upon the gathered believers on Pentecost day. For the Jews present, these symbols of wind and fire remind them of the Exodus event. The crossing of the Red Sea helped form a mixed crowd into the people of God, a people with a common experience of deliverance. So too Pentecost now births the new people of God. Pentecost also reverses the break-up of community that happened as a result of sin in the Tower of Babel story (Genesis 11). Here in the upper room, the believers also speak in many languages, but this time, instead of breaking up community, it makes a new community. Other Jews who are gathered for Pentecost heard the news about Jesus in their own languages and believe.

Chapter 2 ends with a description of the early church right after Pentecost. Many are being added every day, as Peter and others preach boldly about Jesus. The believers devote themselves to the teaching of the apostles. They eat together, pray together. Community life even includes material possessions, as the believers hold all things in common. Some who have property sell the land to help provide for the members in need. Others keep their houses and provide hospitality and a place for worship. The believers do not forsake the temple however, as is evident in our story. And other people notice; not only do they notice the miraculous healings and other miracles; they surely must also notice the great love the believers share together.

It is into this context that the Acts 3:1-10 story emerges. The healing of the lame man, in one sense, is just an expected outcome from all that the believers are doing right. Being filled with the Spirit, going to the temple to pray—these things don't lead to an exclusive community but people who see and respond to the misery of the world. This is a church that has it all—community life, evangelism and concern for the marginalized in the society.

And surely the lame man qualifies for marginal. In this culture, lame people are considered sinners, sick or lame because of their sin or the sin of their parents. And, ironically, they can't go to the only place to get rid of their sin—the temple—because their lameness makes them unclean. They are doomed. Not only do they have a physical disease that renders them unable to live a normal life or to make any kind of a decent wage. They also have a social stigma, an "illness" that makes others look down upon them or wonder what great sin they had committed.

This man at least has one thing going for him—friends who carry him to a good location to ask for alms. Scholars debate what the text means by the Beautiful Gate, but it was probably one of the major entrances for people going to the temple. Peter and John are doing what every devout Jew would do; they go to the temple at three in the afternoon for the second round of daily prayer. Devout Jews are also taught to give heed to the beggars who ask for alms along the way.

The man asks for coins—alms. He does not look at Peter and John; he is not expecting a relationship or anything but the money. He does nothing to warrant their attention or deserve the incredible miracle he receives. No mention is made of his faith. He asks for the wrong thing. Yet he is the recipient of a great miracle.

Peter and John grab his attention and then Peter declares that he has no money to give him,

but something much better—healing by the power of the name of Jesus. It is interesting to note that the community that holds all goods in common doesn't have money to offer this man. But given his social situation, healing from this life long disease (the man is more than 40 years old—Acts 4:22) is wonderful news! Peter takes him up by the right hand and his ankles and feet find strength. The man lying in helplessness is suddenly leaping and praising God.

The man's reaction is pure joy. He follows Peter and John into the temple, perhaps a first-time experience for him. Others react differently. The crowd, recognizing the man as a long-term beggar, is filled with amazement. The priests, temple officials and the Sadducees have a different emotion; they are annoyed (4:2)

The text is very clear (both in our story and later on—3:16) that the name of Jesus is the healing power. Having faith in the name is also key. The name of Jesus is an important phrase in the book of Acts. It heals (3:6, 3:16, 4:7, 4:10, 4:17-18, 9:34). The apostles teach and speak in the name (5:27-28, 5:40-41). The name brings forgiveness and it is only in the name of Jesus that people are saved (4:12, 10:43). Believers are baptized in the name (2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5). And sometimes the believers suffer for the name (9:16). In our story, it is the name alone that effects his healing. It is what Peter has to offer. And, with the strong connection between sin and sickness, the message of Jesus must include the power to heal—or no one believes the story. But it can also be said that the story must go with the healing, because others also claim to heal, but they do not have the story that redeems people and connects them with God.

And healing brings joy. The former lame man leaps and dances before God. What a beautiful picture of God's grace and freedom and the joy it brings.

WORKS CITED:

Faw, Chalmer E. *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Acts*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.

Munck, Johannes. *The Anchor Bible: Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday, 1967.

Willimon, William H. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988.