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First Presbyterian Church
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Acts 3:1-9
Mark 9:38-50

“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask . . . What Do You Need?”

Two weeks ago I started a sermon series titled “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask”. It’s a series about asking simple questions that can lead to courageous conversations if we’re willing to listen to what others have to say. I wanted to do this series because for the most part, I believe we’ve lost our ability to listen to people, especially people with whom we don’t always see eye to eye.

The first week we explored the question “Where are you from?” and last week we asked the question “Where does it hurt?”

This week we’re asking “What do you need?” but instead of looking at it individually, I’d like to take some time this morning to think about what the church needs. I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately, especially since I wrote my stewardship letter to you and mentioned in the letter that the work of church transformation is hard. I’ve reminded more than one church that it didn’t get to where it is overnight and it’s not going to get to where it wants to go overnight. It’s a long process. I’ve also reminded more than one church that there’s no one size fits all, nor a magic bullet, program or ministry to save the day. Church transformation requires a willingness to take risks and make changes, and most people are risk averse and prefer the status quo to the unknown. As someone said to me many years ago at a church transformation conference: churches may get in a rut, but they’re our ruts, and they’re hard to get out of.

In the story you heard Carrie read, the lame man is in a rut; but it was his rut, and he liked it. Every day people would carry the lame man to the temple and lay him at the temple gate so he could beg for alms. And he was an expert at it. Why, he’d been making his living begging for alms his entire life. Each day he sat outside the Beautiful Gate, and every day the people going in and out of it would throw coins his way.

Until, of course, John and Peter showed up. “Alms” the lame man cried out, shaking his coin cup. There wasn’t any need to say anything else. People knew what he wanted; they didn’t even need to look at him.

But Peter and John looked at him. Intently. “Look at us,” Peter said to the man.

And he did. He fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something, but before he could ask again for alms, Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have, I give to you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” And before the lame man knew what was happening, Peter took him by the right hand, hoisted him up off the ground, and the man . . . walked. And then he leapt. And then he strutted into that temple and praised God.

Well, the people left behind – the ones who never expected anything different ever to happen, were flabbergasted. How is this possible, the people wondered? The man is crippled, lame; why just a few minutes ago he was sitting at the gate. What happened, they wonder?

They try to attribute the miracle to Peter and John. “It’s Peter and John’s piety that made him walk. They’re so holy, they can even make a lame man walk. They can do anything.” They think that somehow, Peter and John are superheroes for Jesus who can perform miracles.

Not so fast, Peter says. I’m no superhero, and I didn’t do this. God did this.

And that right there friends, is lesson one in church transformation. Churches need to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit; of what God can do with them if they’re willing. Too many churches are stuck in a rut like the man was, constantly crying out for alms instead of living as if the Holy Spirit might just have something different in mind for them.

You know, the last time I preached on this passage was 12 years ago when my former church was breaking ground for an addition. I had been there 9 years by then, and I can assure you the last thing I ever thought I would do was oversee an addition to the church, especially since they told me at my interview that if they didn’t something different they’d be out of money and closing up shop in ten years. But the next thing you know I’m standing outside the church with an elder who’s talking about busting out a wall and making the library space bigger and

adding a couple of bathrooms. "I'll talk to a buddy and see how much it might cost," he said. And with that, the Spirit started moving.

Now, were there people opposed to it? Of course there were! Anywhere 2 or 3 church people are gathered, there will be opposition. Shoot, I wondered at times if should add on. But a church can't spend its life sitting outside the Beautiful Gate crying alms! Well, I suppose you can, but why would you when you can walk, leap and strut instead? Why would you not accept the Spirit's hand when it's offered and try something different?

Which leads me to lesson #2 in church transformation. Churches need to be open to opportunities. Peter and John were open to the opportunity to speaking to the man – which no one had else had done, and that openness led to his healing. Likewise, churches need to be open to opportunities for ministry even if they're opportunities they're reticent of or wonder if they'll work.

Case in point – the night all of the protests broke out downtown, I was sitting at home minding my own business when the next thing I know Julia yells downstairs, "Mom, there are protests breaking out not far from the church." I turn to my phone just like she told me and yep, sure enough, that's what's happening. The next morning Terry and I came downtown to be a part of the clean-up crew. We stumbled onto the Mayor's press conference, listened for a few minutes, and then headed back to our car. Later that day I started to think that maybe the church should do something. I didn't know what, but if all hell is breaking loose just a few blocks from the church, it seems like the Spirit might be trying to say "Listen up". I email some colleagues. "You think maybe we should hold some sort of prayer vigil?" I ask. I'm a little reticent. I think they're going to tell me that's a dumb idea. Some of them do, but in a nice pastoral sort of way. Until one speaks up; my friend and colleague Bill McGill. "Folks, if the church doesn't speak now, when will it?" They listen to Bill. We gather. I'm on the news.

Two weeks later the Mayor's office calls. Would you like to be on our commission? Why me, I ask? We noticed you were vocal after the protests, the caller says. I say yes.

Friends the point is, we need to not be afraid to claim opportunities when they present themselves, especially when someone gives the church the opportunity to lend its voice to the conversation. That is an increasingly rare thing these days.

I know not all of you agree with me on everything I say, and that's OK. One of the more fruitful conversations I had following George Floyd's murder was with a member who emailed to say, "I was bothered by what you said in a sermon." So we met, and talked – we engaged in a courageous conversation. And we didn't end the conversation seeing eye to eye, but we did have a better sense of where the other was coming from, which was from a place of faith – as brothers and sisters in Christ trying to figure out how to respond to the events of the world.

Friends, it will always be a challenge as to when and how to lend our voice to events around us, but if we don't take the opportunity to lend it we'll never be recognized. We'll just be the church people walk by, never noticing it. Sort of like the people do to the man in our story.

And finally the last lesson in church transformation. Churches need to let go of the stumbling blocks people put in their way, sometimes well-meaning people put them in the way without even knowing it. These stumbling blocks can be fear and distrust; or the could of, should of, would of (s). I was asked last week at the Coffee with the Pastors Carrie and I hosted about where I see the church in a few years. "I see it doing great things!" I said. Because you are capable of great things! I wish all of you could see what I see. I wish you could see that our nursery is now so crowded on Sundays that we need a second worker. I wish you could have seen the talk back session at the play last week where the actors – all young women – told about how great an experience it has been for them to act in a cutting edge play like *The Wolves*, and how brave it is for a church theater to produce the play. I was so proud that we gave these women an opportunity to find their voice! They will never forget that and where they had it! I wish you could have seen the energy at the gallery opening and how packed it was. I wish you could have seen the 9 confirmation students climb the steeple last week and how sweaty my palms were as they did it wondering why I thought it was a good idea to do it. I wish you could see when people say "Thank you. Thank you for being here" like they did at Pridefest because all they've heard from the Church with a Capital C is hate. I wish you could see the Green Team at Eco-Fest and the 70 year age difference between the youngest and oldest member but how none of that matters because they just want this beautiful world of God's to last and they believe the church should lend its voice to make that happen.

I wish you could see all of that and more, because when I see all of that I see a church that isn't afraid of church transformation despite the risks involved and the changes that need to take place to make it happen.

Two weeks ago a member of my former church died; a beloved member. Bernie Davis was a pillar of the church, and the support I received Bernie and his wife Leila in my nearly 18 years there was unwavering – even when I gave them opportunities to waver. The day after I left here, having just accepted this call, I went to see Bernie and Leila to tell them I was leaving, and they were, as they always were, gracious and supportive.

I'll never forget what Bernie said during a moment for mission in which he asked people to support the capital campaign that was happening. "Our best days are in front of us," he said. *Our best days are in front of us.* It's such a rare thing for a church person to say that. Most members live as if their best days are behind them. But not Bernie, he believed and lived as if they were in front of the church.

Friends, aspire to have your best days in front of you. Be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit; seize opportunities when they present themselves, even the opportunities that seem scary or foolish; claim your voice; and let go of the stumbling blocks – for only then will you truly be able to take up your mat and walk, leap and strut into the future God has in mind for you.

Amen.