

Rise and Walk, Keng Sen Chong

A Person with a Physical Disability Encounters Jesus

SCRIPTURE

Acts 3:1–10

MAIN IDEA

God calls us to affirm that each person is a child of God who should be treated with dignity and equity.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord, thou hast given us thy Word for a light to shine upon our path; grant us so to meditate on that Word, and to follow its teaching, that we may find in it the light that shines more and more until the perfect day; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jerome, 342–420

INTRODUCTION

The story for this lesson describes a new era in the early church. After the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), Peter and John performed the first healing miracle. Luke's Gospel recounts Jesus teaching the disciples that the reign of God includes people on the margins of society, particularly people with disabilities. A prime example of this type of story is found in Luke 14: 1–6, when Jesus healed a man who had

dropsy. Although it was not lawful to heal on the Sabbath, Jesus disregarded the law to alleviate the man's suffering. Jesus was moved with compassion when he encountered people with a physical disability. In this lesson's story, although Jesus was no longer with the apostles in the flesh, the power and presence of the Holy Spirit accompanied them into their new roles as leaders of the church continuing the work that Jesus began.

Luke includes two details that are sometimes overlooked but should be examined for our overall understanding of this story: the time of prayer and the location of the Beautiful Gate. Peter and John went up to the temple to pray at three o'clock in the afternoon. It was customary in the first century for Jews to divide daylight into twelve hours. Even Jesus echoed this idea when he asked his disciples, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight?" (Jn 11:9) The hours were understood to be the hours of a working day, which began at sunrise and ended at sunset. Judaism had three special hours for prayer: morning, noon, and night. These times were considered "third hour," "sixth hour," and "ninth hour" respectively. According to the Talmud, Abraham instituted morning prayer (*Shacharit*); Isaac first prayed the afternoon service (*Minchah*); and Jacob was the first to say the evening prayers (*Maariv*).²⁰ The practice

²⁰ Joshua Rabin, "Daily Prayer: Shacharit, Mincha and Maariv," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed March 31, 2023. [myjewishlearning.com/article/shacharit-minchah-and-maariv](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shacharit-minchah-and-maariv).

Acts 3:1–10

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon.² 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.³ When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for

alms.⁴ Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us."⁵ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them.⁶ 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."⁷ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.

⁸ Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.⁹ All the people saw him walking and praising God,¹⁰ 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.

continued into the time of the New Testament and might explain why Peter and John were at the temple at three o'clock.

The Beautiful Gate is not explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the Bible or in other historical sources, and the precise location of the gate has many different theories. Since much of the Temple Mount area was destroyed in 70 CE, the Beautiful Gate may have been the same site as the Golden Gate located on the eastern side of the Temple Mount (sitting above the Kidron Valley across from the Mount of Olives). The Beautiful Gate was a place of public worship and, though not clearly specified in the Bible, tradition suggests that Jesus entered the city through this gate when he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem that started from the Mount of Olives.

EXAMINING THE CHARACTERS

In this story three characters take center stage: Peter, John, and the man who is disabled. Luke also mentions minor characters and uses the collective term "people" to identify them. The people laid the disabled man at the gate so that he could beg each day, and at the climax of the story, all the

people saw the man praising God. Peter and John were both part of the original twelve disciples chosen by Jesus (Lk 6:12–16), and they were present at pivotal moments in Jesus' life. Peter and John were allowed into the house to witness the healing of Jairus' daughter (Lk 8:51–55), they were on the mountain with Jesus and witnessed his transfiguration (Lk 9:28–36), and Jesus sent Peter and John to prepare the Passover meal, which was his Last Supper (Lk 22:7–14).

The text does not provide us with much information about the disabled man. We don't learn his name and neither his parents or home are identified. However, the text does tell us that he was unable to walk since birth (Acts 3:2), and that he was forty years old (Acts 4:22). We also know that he relied on others to get him to the gate every day, so he was able to ask for handouts. In the first-century Greco-Roman world, people with physical limitations had no rights or protections, and it was believed that children born with health conditions and impairments were "unwanted by the gods." Impairments were sometimes considered to be punishment for misbehavior and sin, or a result of an evil force. Since the disabled man was ostracized and criticized for his

Contemplate

How do you believe people with disabilities are currently treated in our culture?

What could be done to improve accommodations for people with special physical needs in schools, public places such as parks or arenas, and religious spaces?

How are people with special needs and disabilities represented in entertainment and media? Name a specific person or character to support your response.

condition, he had no other way to survive than to beg at the temple gate.

SACRED ENCOUNTER

The disabled man was located at the Beautiful Gate outside the temple. His condition kept him from worshipping within the walls of the temple and this “outsideness” reflected the disabled man’s relationship with his community. At the gate he had access to people entering the temple for

prayer and he saw Peter and John passing by. While beggars relied on handouts for their daily needs, temple worshippers considered giving to beggars “almsgiving,” an expression of their faith and a concept deeply rooted in Judaism. Caring for the poor was considered virtuous. The word *alms* is derived from the Greek and translates to *mercifulness*, a term used by Greek-speaking Jews to denote a feeling of compassion and righteousness that leads to the offering of charity to the needy (*zedakah*).²¹ When the man asked Peter and John for a handout, Peter responded to his request by saying, “I have no silver or gold.” They had no money, but they knew they had the ability to heal. Peter said to the man, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” In a swift movement, the man jumped, walked, leapt, and praised God (Acts 3:3-8).

Peter’s actions demonstrated the new movement that was breaking in through the mission of the apostles. Peter and John traveled with Jesus and witnessed many of his miracles, but in this new era they were able to perform miracles themselves through the power of Christ’s name. These ordinary people did extraordinary things by invoking the name of Jesus Christ.

²¹ James Strong and John McClintock, “Alms,” *The Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, accessed March 31, 2023; biblicalcyclopedia.com/A/alms.html.

Call for Bible Study Proposals

The 2024 Presbyterian Women Board of Directors Bible Study Committee will meet in Spring 2024 to choose the author and theme of the 2027–2028 *PW/Horizons* Bible study. Potential authors must demonstrate knowledge of the Bible and related writings, knowledge of and commitment to Reformed theology, experience teaching Bible study, clear understanding of women’s issues in the wider church and in the PC(USA), commitment to and use of inclusive language, active membership in the church, and working knowledge of Presbyterian Women. Deadline for proposals is January 31, 2024. The selection process is changing. If you would like to nominate yourself or someone else, please contact Betsy Ensign-George, PW associate editor, for more information: betsy.ensign-george@pcusa.org; 844/797-2872; or 100 Witherspoon St., Louisville, KY 40202-1396.

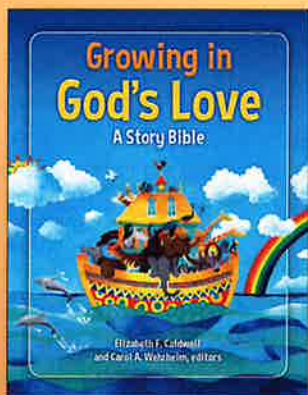
Healing power was unleashed “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” The name of Jesus Christ was the direct link between the living and active Lord in heaven and the faithful community on earth. Throughout Acts, the name of Jesus Christ was invoked to accomplish the work of God: to heal the sick (Acts 3:1–16, 4:7–10), to forgive sins (Acts 10:43), to baptize believers (Acts 2:38, 8:16, 10:48, 19:5), and to perform signs and wonders (Acts 4:30). Even the apostles’ preaching and teaching was done in the name of Jesus—and the authorities persecuted them for it (Acts 4:17–18, 5:28–40).

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

In Greco-Roman culture, disability was considered to be the consequence of sin. An example of this belief is found in the story of the man born blind in John 9:1–12. When the disciples encountered this person they asked Jesus, “‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born

blind?’ And Jesus replied to them, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” As Jesus and the apostles implemented God’s mission throughout Galilee, a new perspective on disability evolved. Jesus and the early church engaged with people with health conditions and impairments, and Luke-Acts presents stories that show how barriers were broken and stereotypes were upended. Luke challenges the dominant assumption that people with health conditions and impairments were outcasts. Through healing stories, we see the injured and ill restored to their rightful places in society. When Peter healed the man at the Beautiful Gate he affirmed that the man was a child of God who should be treated with dignity and equity. This new philosophy dismantled the discrimination and marginalization associated with people in the ancient world who had health conditions and impairments.

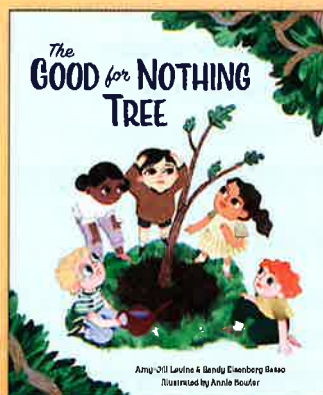
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Luke-Acts affirms each person as made in God's image. Yet even today people with health conditions and impairments are often ignored, overlooked, or made to feel unwelcome in our congregations. Devan Stahl, assistant professor of ethics at Baylor University, says, "Disability is not a sickness or even necessarily a weakness. It is just a limitation, a uniqueness, that enables a person to make a vitally important and distinctive contribution to life and to the Christian community." She goes on to say that people with disabilities should be treated with "the greatest care."²²

Contemplate

If we take Stahl's words to heart, how can our communities of faith value the contributions of people with health conditions and impairments?

How can we become more empathetic communities?

CLOSING PRAYER

We ask you, Master, be our helper and defender. Rescue those of our number in distress; raise up the fallen; assist the needy; heal the sick; turn back those of your people who stray; feed the hungry; release our captives; revive the weak; encourage those who lose heart. Let all the nations realize that you are the only God, that Jesus Christ is your Child, and that we are your people and the sheep of your pasture. Amen.

Pope Clement of Rome, c. 35–96

A Person with a Physical Disability Encounters Jesus

Overview: In this lesson's sacred encounter, the power of Jesus, through the actions of Peter and John, heals a man who is paralyzed, giving him access to worship in the temple. Peter and John carry on Jesus' mission to help people who are marginalized and rejected by society and challenge belief systems that disable, degrade, and dehumanize those who already struggle.

Materials: "Open" sign; assistive equipment or pictures of items that can help people perform activities and live independently; image of Jesus; intercessory prayer notebooks

Prayer

Set up a display with an "Open" sign, assistive equipment or pictures of such equipment, and an image of Jesus.

Online option: Search and share images of assistive equipment and an image of Jesus.

Give everyone a minute to see the display and ask if they can guess the topic of the lesson.

Read: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18:20).

Ask everyone in the group to take three deep breaths.

Lead the group in the opening prayer.

Perform Acts 3:1–10

Invite participants to read the text divided into parts for the narrator (Luke), the person with a disability, Peter, and John. They may wear costumes and do a dramatic presentation or read together as a group. Consider interpreting the story in a new way by giving the paralyzed person a wheelchair, walker, or cane that allows them to move independently and experience the joy of alternative forms of healing.

If participants are online, they can also wear costumes. Another option is to search for and share a short video of a performance based on the text.

Introduce the Lesson

Use the Introduction on page 53 to present this lesson to the group.

Contemplate

Tell the group that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities says: "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."¹

Using the United Nations definition as a guide, we see that the person in this story had a physical impairment that hindered his full and effective participation in worship. Ask: What spaces, practices, or beliefs serve as barriers to full participation in the life of your congregation? Barriers might include no access to the pulpit, no participation in worship or decision making, paternalistic attitudes, degrading stereotypes, isolation from the community, and indifference to the needs and struggles of people with disabilities. What are other barriers that you have observed?

Examine the Characters

Explain that John and Peter gave the man what they had to give him. Let's consider a situation in a previous lesson. Do you remember Amelia's case from lesson four?

Amelia is an elder from your congregation who hasn't attended worship since she began taking care of her grandchildren. One of her grandchildren has Tourette syndrome, which causes involuntary movements and vocalization, among other things.

Ask: Why do you think Amelia isn't comfortable attending worship with her grandchildren? What does your congregation have to offer a child with Tourette syndrome and their family? How could you open the doors of the temple for them?

Transformative Experience

David F. Watson warns against over-emphasizing healing miracles in Luke-Acts. If we only focus on healing, we do

not help people with permanent disabilities and can be counter-productive and even offensive. Some people with disabilities see their conditions as an essential part of their identity and not something to be solved. Watson says, "the connection between disability and identity is one that warrants considerably more analysis than it has yet received."²

In the Greco-Roman world that was grounded in the values of honor and shame, health and religion were related. Misfortune could mean the loss of respect and dignity and could cause rejection from the family. This story from Acts demonstrates Jesus' life-giving attitude and model of care for people with disabilities and teaches us that "... God cares for people who have been pushed to the margins of society. If we are wise, our lives will reflect this same care and concern."³

Closing Prayer

Invite the group to look again at the assistive equipment you displayed and pray the closing prayer.

Until the Next Lesson

Pray for people who are adjusting to the use of assistive equipment like canes, glasses, hearing aids, and other items. Add their names to the lists in the notebooks of intercessory prayers.

Consider observing March 1: International Wheelchair Day; September 23: International Sign Language Day; October 15: International White Cane Day for the Blind; December 3: International Day of Persons with Disabilities; and other days that celebrate the lives of people with disabilities.

¹ "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities," United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, December 13, 2006; ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities.

² David F. Watson, "Luke-Acts," *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary*, Sarah J. Melcher, Mikeal C. Parsons and Amos Yong, ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 328–330.

³ Ibid.