What’s in a Name?

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Acts 3:1-10

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If celebrity pictures seem too good to be true, that’s because they are too good to be true. There’s a reason why their cover shots have no excess cellulite or bags under their eyes. There’s a reason why virtually every Hollywood luminary has a fake tan, fake hair and fake everything else. It’s because of a little invention that’s been around for 25 years called Photoshop.

What’s so bad about the fact that every celebrity photo has been airbrushed, manipulated and digitally enhanced? It creates unimaginable images of beauty, that’s what. Ask yourself, what impact do these unattainable images have on our children?

One of the reasons why I believe the Bible is that there’s no attempt to Photoshop our spiritual heroes. Our heroes are presented to us, warts and all. Their flaws are left untouched. There’s no attempt to airbrush sin from their lives.

The Apostle Peter is a case in point. He’s not only capable of great feats of faith, he’s also susceptible to horrible acts of betrayal.

We’re now in chapter 28 of The Story. During Jesus’ arrest and trial, three different people pick Peter out of the crowd as having been with Jesus. Each time, Peter denies any association with Jesus.

Why does Jesus choose to work with such flawed people? The answer is simple. Because deeply-flawed people are all Jesus has to work with!

Yet once Jesus is raised from the dead and dispenses his Spirit to his disciples, something dramatic happens. These aforementioned, timid disciples become bold witnesses for Jesus Christ.

In our story from Acts 3, Peter and John are on their way to the temple. Note to self—Jesus’ disciples have no interest in starting a new religion. They continue to observe Jewish custom. One such custom is the practice of offering prayer at the temple each morning and afternoon.

The temple courtyard attracts all manner of beggars asking for hand-outs. One such beggar has been coming to the same temple gate called Beautiful for the past 40 years. He’s carried to the same place each day by family and
friends to beg for food. He shakes his tin cup at Peter and John to let it be known, “Alms for the poor.”

Peter looks directly at this desperate beggar. Don’t ever look a beggar in the eye unless your plan is to help this person! Take the people who stand at stop lights in our area holding signs, “Will work for food.” What happens if you make eye contact with them? They will descend upon your car in a heartbeat asking for money. The trick, don’t tell me you haven’t done it, is to pretend as though you don’t see them.

Peter must have had a spiritual premonition that God wants him to help this beggar. He even accentuates the moment by saying to him, “Look at us.” The man looks expectantly, anticipating a handout.

Peter tells the man they have no money. Luke has already informed his readers in the previous chapter that the disciples have pooled their resources to meet financial hardship in the community. While they don’t have money, they’re able to do one better. Peter says to this beggar, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”

Peter helps this cripple to his feet. His ankles become strong and he’s able, for the first time in his life, to walk on his own two feet. He tries leaping. He has always wanted to jump for joy. He praises God for his miraculous healing.

The prophet Isaiah announced 700 years before Christ that one of the signs of the Messianic age is that “the lame shall leap like a deer” (35:6). Well, here’s looking at it! Our man in question is walking, leaping and praising God.

This beggar is well-known to the people arriving for afternoon prayer. A crowd quickly congregates around Peter and John. Peter seizes the moment to address the crowd. “Why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we have made this lame man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our ancestors, has enabled this man to walk. This same power that raised Jesus from the dead makes it possible for this lame man to walk again.”
Peter interprets to the crowd, “By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know has been 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” (3:16).

There are two ingredients in this healing: the name of Jesus and the faith of these two disciples. Pronouncing the name of Jesus is not some magic incantation or formula. When the name is invoked with sincere faith, there’s power in the name. It’s not the faith of the lame man on display here. The only thing he’s expecting is a handout. Peter and John are the ones who exhibit faith in Christ’s healing power.

In virtually every healing story in Scripture, these two ingredients appear: faith and the power of the name. We supply the faith, God supplies the power.

Peter ends his sermon with a call to repentance: “Repent and turn to God so that your sins may be blotted out” (3:19). It’s no coincidence that this call to repentance also features prominently in Peter’s first Pentecost sermon. When Peter concludes his sermon and people ask, “What should we do?” Peter answers, “Repent and be baptized” (2:38). Repentance is a key ingredient in unlocking the power of God.

*Repent* is a much-maligned word. We often associate it with fire and brimstone preachers. Yet, the Biblical word is far less pejorative. Repent in the Greek, *metanoia*, simply means to turn or change. The first step in making any midcourse correction is the simple recognition that I’m going in the wrong direction.

When I decided to follow Christ with my life at age 19, I came to the realization that I was going in the wrong direction. I recognized that I was living for myself. I had become self-absorbed. So, I repented and changed direction. I was now turned toward God and His redemptive purposes for my life.

Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the Wittenberg Door to engage the church hierarchy in debate. His first article for debate concerns this matter of repentance: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘repent,’ he
intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.” On the surface, Luther’s words seem a little bleak. Is Luther suggesting that Christians will never make much progress in their spiritual lives? Actually, he’s saying just the reverse. Repentance is the only way we will ever make progress in growing into the character of Christ. Our spiritual lives are marked by countless turnings away from self and toward God.

I have long been taken by Socrates’ bold statement that “An unexamined life isn’t worth living.” If we aren’t intentional about examining our motives and values, we run the risk of living unintentionally for things that really don’t matter.

This self-examination principle sounds easier than it plays out in real life. We resist examination because it’s too painful. We defy change; we prefer homeostasis.

This is borne out in the Reveal Survey many of us have taken. Two plus years ago, 340 of us took the survey. Several months ago 350 took it. This survey functions as a spiritual growth index. It tells us we’re pretty satisfied. Sure, we’ve moved the meter a few percentage points higher in the last few years. But we generally like where we are and we don’t show evidence of wanting to grow all that much. If you find yourself stagnating in your spiritual life, you may need to resist these self-satisfied tendencies and commit yourself to a goal of spiritual growth.

I’ve been reflecting on John and Charles Wesley’s 21 questions they prepared for use in their small group at Oxford University in 1729. I’ve been thinking about these questions over this past week. These questions are available in printed form in the lobby or on our website.

Take the first question, “Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?”

Hypocrisy is a particular malady for religious people. People often lay at my feet that the church is full of hypocrites. Fair enough. We are prone to say one thing and do another. Wrestling with this question helps us
close the gap. Now, to be fair about it, the church doesn’t have a corner on the hypocrisy market. Hypocrisy is a human struggle, not merely a religious one.

Let’s take question 20, “Do I grumble or complain constantly?” I compiled a list of things people complained about this week: slow internet service, weather, traffic, Mondays, spam email, people who talk too loudly on their cell phones, poor customer service, choice of songs in worship and dog owners who don’t clean up after their dogs.

Some of us are afflicted with a critical spirit. We’ve become habitual faultfinders and dead-eye critics of other people’s behavior. We rely too much on putdowns and sarcasm. A critical spirit is often a defense mechanism. We tend to criticize in other people what we don’t like in ourselves. Ask God to help you with a critical spirit.

I challenge you to use these questions in your spiritual practice this week. We talk often about the value of prayer, reading Scripture and cultivating spiritual friends. Some of you here let this invitation pass right through you. Such things are not really all that important. No, it is that important if you want to grow into the likeness of Christ.