

I have a genre of recurring dream, in which I get myself into trouble by a desire to be helpful. One time recently I dreamed that I had two baby elephants, and one wouldn't come in the house, and I was worried that it would freeze to death but I really had to leave and I couldn't stay and watch it. Plus the other baby elephant was in the house already and I knew that wasn't good for it or the house. I was trapped. Another time I dreamed that I had acquired six flamingo chicks, three black and three pink, and they had grown to the size of ostriches and were really difficult to manage, but nobody else would take them. You see the pattern here.

Thus I approach the story of the man at the Beautiful Gate with some trepidation, because it seems that the script is very straightforward: if you are a true disciple of Christ, and you see someone with a serious problem that nobody has been able to solve all his life, you just march right up and make the boldest proclamation you possibly can, claiming that in Jesus Christ that problem is totally gone away. Just take ownership of that problem, if you really believe in the Resurrection, if you really have faith. It seems to me that this is how I end up with unruly baby elephants and flamingoes in my house, taking on stuff that I don't honestly know how to handle just because I think someone should.

But there are some peculiarities in the story that suggest such a straightforward take is not necessarily the best one. We find out in chapter 4 that the man has suffered for 40 years. HMM. Forty years, what else went on for 40 years? Oh, that's right, the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness with Moses for 40 years before they entered the promised land. He does not look at Peter and John as he asks for alms but they look "intently" at him and say, "Look at us." So, there's an implication that more "seeing" has a role in the healing to come.

And finally, there's a strange specificity about the healing: "his feet and ankles were made strong." Apparently earlier scholars used to point to this as evidence that Luke, the author of Acts, was a physician, because he was using medical terminology, but that's been debunked; these are just the words for feet and ankles.

But here's what's interesting: Luke is writing for a Hellenistic audience, and in Greco-Roman culture, there was a firmly established correlation between physiognomy and character. Someone named Adamantus writes,

Perfect, solid ankles belong to a noble man, those which are soft and smooth to a more unmanly man and those which are very thin to a cowardly and intemperate man. All those who have thick ankles, thick heels, fleshy feet, stubby toes and thick calves are for the most part stupid or mad.

In a culture where the "physiognomic consciousness" pervaded, "well-made" ankles and feet are a sign of a "robust character"; conversely, the lame man's weak ankles would have been viewed as an outward physical sign of his inner weak moral character, his "soft," "timid," "cowardly" or "effeminate" nature. This weakness is confirmed by his presentation in the narrative as a passive participant. The lame man "is carried"; he is "laid daily at the gate"; "Peter took him by the right hand"; and "raised him up." The man's moral weakness is confirmed also by Peter's reference to the man as "weak" later on in chapter 4.ⁱ

It's also true that Jews shared some of this bias against physical infirmity, because a late first-century document called 4 Ezra says, "Do not ridicule a lame man." But the Greeks (and thus the Romans) were really into this; there are more authors than you really want to hear from, all declaiming about people's ankles.

The physiognomic understanding of weak ankles and feet combined with the reality of

the derision of the dis-abled in Greco-Roman society and the possible social exclusion hinted at by his location "outside" the gate, would have caused the audience of Acts 3-4 to view the lame man as a thoroughly negative character. They would recognize him as a morally weak and passive man who is unable to stand on his own two feet.ⁱⁱ But Peter and John lock gazes with this man—they look hard at him, and he looks at them, and Peter tells him, “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” Peter raises the man up by his right hand, and then the man’s feet and ankles are made strong and he enters the temple with them, “walking and leaping and praising God.” Here is another echo of the Hebrew Bible, because Isaiah says in chapter 35 that "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall **leap like a deer**" when Israel is restored by the king sent by God. The lame man in Acts is like Judah in Israel’s time, brought low, and an object of scorn. His healing symbolizes the coming restoration of Israel as part of the establishment of God’s cosmic reign, inaugurated by Jesus and continued through the ministry of the apostles and Paul.

Here’s what Luke, our narrator, has done: he has *used* Greco-Roman physiognomic conventions to lure his audience into the story. Oh, here’s this weak man, probably of weak character as well, what will Peter and John do with him? And then Luke *subverts* those conventions by implying that the lame man is like the unrestored Israel—down but not out, as it were, still able to lock eyes with God’s messengers and to be restored to his true character as one who can walk and leap and praise God. Those conventions, by which we attribute a deficient character to a person with particular physical qualities, turn out to be empty.

Luke invokes the categories of physiognomy and cultural biases against the disabled only to overturn them. The lame man (along with the bent woman, Zacchaeus, and the

Ethiopian eunuch) would have been viewed by Luke's audience as morally weak, corrupt, or even evil, but Luke claims that the eschatological community is comprised of such as these, a community in which "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). If the lame man's body language in standing with the bold apostles fulfills physiognomic conventions, his actions of leaping and praising defy those conventions.

There's no question that Luke would have us, the church, take on the ills and troubles of other people. But honestly, sometimes the best we can do is what the lame man's neighbors had done for 40 years, which is carry him to a place where he could beg enough money to feed himself that day. That's what our charity does; it's a bridge to get people through the day until there is more systemic change that gives them more opportunity. It takes more than a doctor or medicine to make a person well; it takes social systems that make it possible to get places on time, to stay warm and clean at home, to eat a balanced diet, to be protected from cheats and extortionists. Our charity will not cure those things, just like me taking in homeless elephants will not solve *their* problems. We also have to be involved in the marathon of changing systems through our very discouraging political process.

However, the good news of this story is that the community of God's reign is *exactly* those who are excluded from privilege and access. It's exactly the lame, the halt and the blind—the ones who are routinely underestimated and overlooked--whom God's messengers **see** and invite in. The church, for Luke, is the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit descends on us to give us the gifts to carry on Jesus' work. And that work is not necessarily working miraculous healings, though I will never exclude those as one of Gods graces. But that work is really recognizing the eschatological community right here and now, in the imperfect people we are

and our neighbors are. The eschatological community, as it is and as it will be, celebrates people as they are, gifted in peculiar and countercultural ways. And because God cherishes each one, we also challenge the conventional wisdom that says some people are expendable, and we work to change the systems that keep our sisters and brothers down.

Holy Lord, your followers gave to your children something more powerful and more valuable than riches. They gave healing and hope. Bring healing and hope and transformation into our world and let us not despair or tire. Amen.

ⁱ THE CHARACTER OF THE LAME MAN IN ACTS 3-4 MIKEAL C. PARSONS
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ⁱⁱ *ibid*