

The story today of Peter healing the lame man at the gate of the temple functions partly on a symbolic level, bringing in echoes from the Hebrew scriptures to demonstrate that the new Christian community is a fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham. The healing of the lame man is emblematic of God's restoration of Israel promised in Isaiah 35. And the healing is the occasion for Peter's first bout with the chief priests and scribes, who order him not to speak or teach any more in the name of Jesus, foreshadowing a future of conflict with religious authorities. But when we read it today, I think it hits us at a more literal level—at least, as I read other preachers' comments in my Facebook groups, I see that they are anguishing about how to preach such a passage to congregations that contain people who have not experienced healing, or who have lost someone for whom they would dearly have loved healing, and that's what comes to my mind first too. Just the literal miraculous healing story packs such a gut punch that we really need to attend to it. This isn't Jesus doing healings; it's his disciples. Why can't we do this?

In this story the message of resurrection is translated into tangible terms oriented toward human well-being. The message of the resurrection is not an abstract belief to assent to or argue against. Jesus made the gospel tangible with food and healing and table fellowship—if the Holy Spirit is active and alive in the world, then we would expect to see continuity with that activity within the circle of his followers. Peter and John make the Good News tangible by healing the lame man.

A professor at Duke Divinity School named Kate Bowler wrote in the *New York Times* a couple of months ago about her research on the prosperity gospel and her own illness. She has written a book called *Blessed*, which examines the belief

that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith. I think June ran into a local example of that recently on TV, a channel that promised powerful interventions for those who sent in money. Kate Bowler writes, “I spent 10 years interviewing televangelists with spiritual formulas for how to earn God’s miracle money. I held hands with people in wheelchairs being prayed for by celebrities known for their miracle touch. I sat in people’s living rooms and heard about how they never would have dreamed of owning this home without the encouragement they heard on Sundays.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/14/opinion/sunday/death-the-prosperity-gospel-and-me.html?_r=0

The modern prosperity gospel is related to a popular strain of thought in self-help psychology, the power of the mind to heal. Think positively, visualize healing. It has its roots in the writings of an early 20th century pastor named E. W. Kenyon, who told Christians to

avoid words and ideas that create sickness and poverty; instead, they should repeat: “God is in me. God’s ability is mine. God’s strength is mine. God’s health is mine. His success is mine. I am a winner. I am a conqueror.” Or, as prosperity believers summarized it for me, “I am blessed.”

The prosperity gospel tries to solve the riddle of human suffering, says Bowler, by selling prayer as an instrument by which you can get God to do what you want. “Follow these rules, and God will reward you, heal you, restore you.” “If a believer gets sick and dies, shame compounds the grief. Those who are loved and lost are just that — those who have lost the test of faith.” It is understandable that people try to find a way to control death and destruction—but to do so is to take a religion based on the contemplation of a dying man and strip it of its call to surrender all.

Perhaps worse, it has replaced Christian faith with the most painful forms of certainty. The movement has perfected a rarefied form of America's addiction to self-rule, which denies much of our humanity: our fragile bodies, our finitude, our need to stare down our deaths (at least once in a while) and be filled with dread and wonder. At some point, we must say to ourselves, *I'm going to need to let go.*

Kate Bowler reflects on her research now from the perspective of someone dying of cancer. At 35, she has been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. She will leave behind a husband and a toddler. Even among her theologically sophisticated friends, she sees the urge to take control: if kale salads and searches of the Mayo Clinic website could cure, she would be a triathlete. Everyone wants to feel like something can be done. The chances of that are slim.

Jesus didn't cure everybody either. He didn't still *all* the seas; he didn't feed *all* the hungry people. He manifested the kingdom as foretastes. Even the idea of resurrection presupposes death. Christians do not believe in immortality, but in death and resurrection. So in a world in which life is fragile, bodies are delicate, and sometimes there's no reason for what happens, we experience pain and death despite our best efforts. "Everything happens for a reason," a well-meaning neighbor told Kate Bowler's husband, and he snapped back, "I'd love to hear the reason my wife is dying."

Kate Bowler points out the fallacy of exercising faith to achieve wholeness—even Jesus didn't receive that. She's alive right now, and she says that cancer has ushered in new ways of being alive—

everything feels as if it is painted in bright colors. In my vulnerability, I am seeing my world without the Instagrammed filter of breezy certainties and perfectible moments. I can't help noticing the brittleness of the walls that keep most people fed, sheltered and whole. I find myself returning to the

same thoughts again and again: *Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.*

I appreciate her truthfulness. I believe her. But let me talk again about Peter and John and the lame man at the Beautiful Gate.

Healing is certainly a symbol of resurrection, and Luke, who wrote Acts, is telling us that the disciples in continuity with Jesus continued to bring about foretastes of the kingdom. They continued to spread Good News. The man is healed, not by his own faith, but by Peter's faith. Once he is healed, he goes into the Temple with them—he becomes part of their community. And if there's one thing the book of Acts is clear about, it's that Christianity means community. This man has experienced resurrection in the form of physical healing and entrance into community. Where once he lay alone at the Beautiful Gate, now he has family. In the ensuing verses, when Peter and John get into trouble, the man is right there with them, not gone off to follow his own pursuits but getting in trouble along with them, in solidarity.

We've all been through tragedy, in our own spaces and also together in this church. We know very well the fragility of life, and the reality that we all die. To our credit, I think, we haven't tried to force God into rewarding our faith or good deeds by performing miracles. Instead, we have hung with each other, awkwardly or gracefully, but together. What I find over time is that the hanging together is not only a way to comfort but also a way to wisdom. We learn and deepen our souls by sharing brokenness. And faith does not give us an exemption from the course of events, but a path to wisdom through those events.

Death is a reality, even for Jesus. He showed us that very clearly. There isn't

any healing—performed by Jesus, performed by Peter, performed by anyone—that prevented death at some point; even Lazarus died eventually. So maybe we shouldn't feel so bad that we can't offer others what Peter and John offered the lame man. What we *can* offer is companionship through the storm, and mutual support as we learn to live with fragility and uncertainty, as we develop wisdom. And then what God offers, that we don't have to understand for it to be true, is the promise that death is not the end, that there is nothing in heaven or earth or under the earth that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. After death comes resurrection.

Holy Lord, your followers gave to your children something more powerful and more valuable than riches. They gave healing, hope and wisdom. Bring healing and hope into our world and by your presence in our lives help us develop wisdom. Amen.