
CALL IT BEAUTIFUL
ACTS 3:1-11
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 2022
BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT

Lin Manuel Miranda’s Broadway musical masterpiece “Hamilton” tells the story of Alexander Hamilton and his critical role as an orphan and immigrant in the founding of the United States. Late in the first Act, Alexander Hamilton is meeting with George Washington, when Washington shares about his early experience as a commander in a song called, “History Has Its Eyes on You.” In the song, Washington describes his fear of being judged by his early mistakes that led to the loss of many lives. He then turns to Hamilton to inspire and encourage him to recognize the place he would be taking in the history of the US and the world. The closing lyrics of the song say:

I know that greatness lies in you
But remember from here on in
History has its eyes on you
History has its eyes on you

History has its eyes on you. It’s a heavy thought. Now, not many of us will ascend to the national and global prominence of someone like Alexander Hamilton, but there is something to thinking about how history will tell the story of our time and of how we lived given the historical situation in which we find ourselves. I know a colleague for whom this refrain played in her head as she was navigating the complexities of leadership in the summer of 2020 when we were encountering the pandemics of Covid19 and racism within our society.

What if I told you today, history has its eyes on you, church? What story is it going to tell? Considering the data on current trends of the church in America, the story might not be a good one. Folks are leaving the church at concerning rates and fewer people than ever are finding a home in the church in the first place. In just the last decade, there are 12% fewer people who identify as Christian in the US. The numbers for Gen Z and Millennials—those generation groups under 40—are even lower.¹ And while confidence in small businesses and the military remain high, the overall confidence in the church or organized religion has been on consistent decline since 1975 when the data started being tracked. Now, only 37% percent of people have a high level of confidence in it and less than 30% of people under the age of 35 do.² And finally, just a bit more than half of people think churches and religious organizations do more good than harm in American society.³ Though the reasons for this decline in people’s view of the church are multi-faceted, we must acknowledge that the world is watching, and what people are seeing is not inviting them to think well of the church or into the wonder, awe, and praise of God. Given all of this, if history is watching, what story will be told about the church today? What story will be told about us?

The book of Acts tells the story of the formation and spread of the early church. Acts shares what happened when the Spirit of God moved in and through the early followers of Jesus to spread the message of God’s good news in Jesus to the whole world. History was watching the community of Christ followers. And the story that has been told through the ages has been one of the early church’s radical welcome, and its embodiment and proclamation of Jesus’s message of good news to the poor, of release to the captives, of recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18). Those early communities of Christ followers gathered for fellowship, shared what they had in common, ate together, and worshiped, praised, and prayed regularly. And many

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/352316/americans-confidence-major-institutions-dips.aspx>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/11/15/americans-have-positive-views-about-religions-role-in-society-but-want-it-out-of-politics/>

were drawn into this life; thousands at a time Acts tells us. The world was watching, and many were compelled to be part of the Spirit's movement among those early Christians.

Acts 3 shares a story of one occasion when people were watching the early Christ followers publicly practice their piety by going to the temple to pray. Luke, the author of Acts, tells the story slowly and deliberately. He shares about something beautiful that happened at the temple's entry gate called Beautiful. Luke tells how Peter and John were on their way to the temple to pray. As they walked into the temple, an unnamed man who was physically limited, lame from birth, was being carried to the entry way of the temple. God's faithful people knew that giving alms and providing charitably was a way of fulfilling God's commands to care for the needy (Deuteronomy 15:7-8), so for a lame man such as this one, this was an appropriate and fitting way to survive. If someone was going into the place of prayer and encounter with God, there was no skipping the hardship of life.⁴ They had to walk by the pain and struggle of a neighbor in need. Needy neighbors like this man were placed at the boundary, the border, the margin of the place of worship, prayer, and encounter with God for people to walk by. So daily, this man's community carried him to the gate called Beautiful, so he could have his mundane needs met.

The man had expectations about the kind interactions that would happen at the gate. While they may have been relational in some ways, perhaps most importantly for him, they were transactional. The man needed a way to survive, and there is no judgment in that. The man had his eyes on these representatives of the church. He saw Peter and John, and he thought they would be part of this transactional relationship. But Peter and John looked on him in a different way. They were seen, but instead of returning a transactional gaze, they looked more deeply at the man and invited him to see them differently as well. Using yet a third word for seeing in just 2 verses, Luke tells us that Peter said to the man, "Look at us." Ironically, the man was already watching them, already expecting something of them, already observing these early Christians—he had his eyes on them. And even in giving the men his full attention, he expected something from them, something that would help him survive for the day.

But Peter did not provide what the man expected. Peter looked past the transaction, as needed as that was, to something deeper and more profound. Peter said, "I have no silver or gold." After all, a community of believers that sells their possessions and shares everything in common won't likely have spare change. He continued, "But what I have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." Peter recognized that what the man truly needed wasn't someone to throw him more money. He needed someone to offer the kind of healing that is full welcome into the community of worship. The man didn't merely need his mundane needs met; he needed something beautiful. What Peter knew is that Christ's community is one where everyone is welcome, and in that welcome people experience healing, wholeness, and peace. He remembered the times where Jesus healed those broken in body and spirit. And he recalled how Jesus instructed them to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to their parties—that is to be part of their joyful community. So just as Jesus had taught him, and with the Spirit of Christ living in him, Peter invited the man into new life. Raised to his feet like Jesus was raised from the dead, this man was welcomed into a community marked by Jesus's inclusive love for all. The prophet Isaiah before had said, "Beautiful are the feet of the one who announces peace and brings good news." Well, Peter and John's foot work was beautiful as they share the good news with this man.

Let me pause here for a moment before discussing any more of the story to make sure we don't overlook a few important things for us today. First, we must not miss that the early Christians who were going to pray could not avoid the places of pain and hurt in the world. They walked right through them to meet with God. And as they did, they paid attention to what they saw, and then they responded. There was no missing it. They had to see. Their faithfulness in prayer was not without their faithfulness to the people in pain they passed. This is instructive for Christians today. I wonder, on your drive to church, what places do you pass through or by? Have you ever paid attention to the pain present in those places—perhaps even in your own neighborhood? Have you noticed where your drive does not take you? Maybe your journey avoids the hard places by design. Even on this campus, have you considered the students whose dorms you walk by and how their places of pain—physical, emotional, spiritual, or

⁴ William H. Willimon, *Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1988), 44. "The path toward significant prayer is a way that goes straight through, not around, human misery."

relational—may need your presence? I wonder what you see as you come to pray. I wonder to what you give your attention.

Second, the great gift of healing that the disciples offered the man did more than just make him able to walk, as important as that was. The disciples welcomed the man, in a way he never had been before, into the fullness of a community of those who follow God. When the man was unable to walk, he was only known for what he lacked and what he needed. The full invitation into the community of Christ shifts the perspective on this man. Fully welcomed, fully embraced, fully part of the community, this differently abled man became known for his great praise of God and the contribution he could make as a member of Christ's church. This is to say, he was known in his full humanity as a valuable member of Christ's community. This example matters for how our community embraces our siblings in Christ. Regardless of any differences—those related to race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, or physical ability just to name a few—the church is called to be a community of radical welcome who embraces people's full humanity for the glory of God. For example, when considering those with physical or mental limitations or differences, the church is called to be a people who welcome all as valuable members and contributors to the community. Some folks will experience healing and wholeness simply by being invited into the community of Jesus. And that is true regardless of whether their physical and mental ailments or limitations have been or ever will be remedied. The example set by Jesus and these early Christians show us that the church's welcome of those labeled "disabled" must be as great or greater than the welcome and full participation that any other community offers our differently abled siblings. If you want to see Christians in Durham doing this well, I encourage you to get to know the people at Reality Ministries.

Third, we should not miss that material resources matter, too. Too often we hear Peter and John's response to the man outside of the full context of the early church. They may not have had silver and gold to give the man in that moment. Yet, when they offered him healing in the name of Jesus, they welcomed him into a community that ensured the needs of all were met. They didn't simply give the man independence by healing his feet and ankles, so that he could go make it on his own. To use a popular metaphor, they didn't simply give him a fish or teach him how to fish. They gave him something greater. They gave him an interdependence rooted in Jesus's calling to his followers to love one another. And though I believe this man's ankles and feet were physically healed in that moment, just as important was the relational healing that took place making this marginalized man a whole part of Christ's community. And because that early church community shared all they had to meet the needs of all, this man's economic insecurity and brokenness were also healed. While most Christian communities don't operate with such a communal sharing of possessions as the early church did, the church is still called to care for each other's material needs in ways that challenge the economic status quo and norms of our society. There's so much more to say here, but let me return to Acts.

The story of this now healed man didn't stop with him standing. No. The man responded with joyful action. Last week Dean Powery asked us to rise as we were able if God had done a mega thing in our lives. Well, this man one upped him. He rose, walked, leaped, and praised God. I imagine the man was so overcome with joy that he was running the aisles of the temple just like people of the charismatic church of Cameron run the aisles when rushing the court for an unexpected victory. How can someone who has experienced such a gift of welcome, such a healing, such a blessing not be overcome with exuberant praise of God? And when he did, Luke tells us that the people around him noticed. The people had their eyes on this man. And when they did, they were overcome with wonder and amazement. They had to know what happened.

It is then, and only then, that Peter begins to preach with his words to the onlookers. He proclaims a message of repentance, of turning toward Jesus, of a change in the orientation of the people's minds and hearts to the welcoming ways of the messiah. And he preaches this message so that they might receive refreshment—like a life-giving drink of water on a scorching day. "Repent and turn to God," Peter says, "so that times of refreshing may come in the presence of the Lord."

We see in this story that the invitation to follow Jesus, to join Christ's community, is more significantly about receiving goodness than it is about avoiding destructive judgment. It is more about being compelled by

beauty than being deterred by damnation. I suspect that in a time like today where people are longing for hope, are desperate for good news, and need refreshment and renewal and life, a compelling and beautiful witness to Jesus's community of welcome is the best thing we can offer. I suspect if onlookers see us demonstrating a community of full inclusion and welcome, and then feel invited to participate in this refreshment and community, then the data trends will shift in a positive direction. Perhaps if people see the church at the gates of our times welcoming the outsiders, the marginalized, the oppressed, and those so often neglected into the wholeness and healing of life in Jesus's community, they too will respond with wonder and awe. Perhaps they will see all this and call it beautiful. The world is watching. History has its eyes on you, church. So what will they see?