

“The Gospel of Second Chances”

Acts 3:1-26

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Up to this point it had been a normal day in the Temple. People were coming to offer sacrifices, pray at the appointed hours and listen to rabbis teach as they meandered through the courtyards and colonnades. Everything changed, however, when Peter and John arrived around three o'clock in the afternoon to pray.

A beggar stationed near the Gate called Beautiful asked Peter and John for money. Peter informed the man he had no coins in his pocket, but he did have a gift for him. Invoking the name of Christ, Peter instructed the beggar to get up and walk.

With Peter's help, this beggar who was born lame and had never walked stood up. The longer he stood, the more strength he felt surging through his ankles and legs, which prompted him to begin leaping for joy and praising God for this gift of healing.

As you would expect, large crowds were drawn to this man as he began dancing around Solomon's Porch. For almost forty decades, he had been carried to the Temple so he could beg for money. Everyone either knew him or knew of him, which added to their disbelief and sense of wonder.

Peter seized this opportunity to explain how this miracle occurred and to share the Gospel. He knew he was the channel for this blessing, but not the source. This was why he quickly deflected attention from John and him, focusing instead upon the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who had healed this beggar in order to honor his son and faithful servant, Jesus.

Peter then told Jesus' story to the growing number of people surrounding him on Solomon's Porch. He wanted the worshipers in the Temple that day to know Jesus had been sent by God to fulfill the prophet's dreams for a just and peaceful world. His mission was to reflect the heart and nature of God by living a holy and righteous life, confronting evil, speaking truth to power and righting wrong.

Even though Jesus was faithful to God and this divine mission, he was crucified as a common criminal in order to silence his prophetic voice. What made his death more tragic was that it was orchestrated by some of the very religious leaders who were in charge of the daily operations of the Temple, including the Sadducees. This elitist group of wealthy power brokers' primary goal was to maintain peace in Jerusalem so the Romans would leave them alone and let them conduct their civic and religious duties the way they wanted.

It seems some of the Sadducees, along with other highly influential scribes and Pharisees, had become addicted to power, prestige, attention and wealth. They had grown more concerned about their own welfare than the living conditions of the people they were called to serve and help.

When Jesus exposed their selfishness and hypocrisy, they made the decision to arrest him and to discredit him with slanderous lies. These corrupt leaders were confident they had succeeded in removing this rebel who threatened their status and position when they convinced the Romans to collaborate with them to crucify Jesus.

You can see why Peter's message about God's vindication of Jesus through his resurrection incensed the religious leaders whose goal was to hold on to their positions of power. This was the last thing they wanted to hear, especially the Sadducees who did not even believe in the afterlife, and Peter knew it.

Peter also knew by telling Jesus' story and urging the religious leaders who had gone astray to repent of their evil ways, his life was now in danger. This did not deter him, though. He continued to speak boldly and courageously.

It is this part of the story, Peter's passion and courage, which intrigues me. He had not always been this courageous. Three times around a charcoal fire outside Pilate's palace the night Jesus was arrested, Peter denied even knowing the man who called him to be one of his disciples. Where was his courage then?

So, what happened? How did Peter go from 'I don't know him' to 'let me tell you about him'? How did Peter find his courage and his voice?

Maybe I should focus on where he found his courage and voice instead of how. I think he found it around a charcoal fire early one morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. (John 21:1-23)

This was the place the resurrected Jesus had a conversation with Peter about his behavior the night he lost his courage. This was the morning Jesus restored Peter's self-esteem and gave him back his future.

Three times Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, reminiscent of the three times Peter denied him the night Jesus was arrested.

Three times Jesus instructed Peter to feed his sheep, indicating it was time to go back to helping people as he had been doing before he lost his courage.

When Peter realized Jesus loved him unconditionally and was giving him a chance to redeem himself, he took it. This time, Peter would not disappoint his Lord. Never again did he want to smell the putrid odor of cowardly guilt and shame.

I don't know what your worst decision has been or what has been your biggest mistake, but I know it does not have to have the final word in your life. You will have an opportunity at some point in the future to redeem yourself.

Ask God and those you hurt to forgive you for what you did wrong and then be patient. Your time will come to respond differently to a similar situation that calls for your best. Be ready, and when it presents itself, seize the opportunity to do what you wish you had done weeks, months or even years earlier.

This is what Peter did and you can, too. The redemptive and transformative power of love and forgiveness makes it possible for you to add more chapters to your life's story, the kind that overshadows guilt and shame...the kind that restores self-esteem and rebuilds lives...the kind that inspires others and transforms lives.

Just ask Peter.