**Sermon for Sept. 15 2024 Acts 3, selected verses “Actions Speak Louder Than Words”**

*THE SCRIPTURE BEGINS One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon.**Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!”****5****So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

*THE SCRIPTURE CONCLUDES While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon’s Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: “Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go.**You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see. “Now, fellow Israelites, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.**But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—Jesus the Christ.”*

Welcome back to the second week of our eight-week sermon series, ***All You Need to Know about Christianity, a Drama in Eight Acts.*** Today is the second act, as it were, and normal expectation would be that we would move on to the second *chapter* of the magnificent book of Acts. But normal isn’t in play today…we are skipping chapter two, the famous retelling of the Pentecost story, because we devote time to Pentecost every year and I think the broad strokes are solidly painted in our minds and hearts. Instead, we will move right on to chapter 3, where the work of the freshly-filled Church gets underway with, big surprise, a healing story. This is the first healing in the book, and certainly the first initiated by Peter and John while not relying directly on the earthly presence and power of Jesus. I gotta say, they did pretty good! Listen to this:

*And the lame man, lame from birth, saw Peter and John about to enter the temple, and he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”* Our writer, St. Luke, crams a lot of important detail into his storytelling. Not just a lame man, possibly temporarily or recently incapacitated, but a *lifelong* sufferer from mobility issues. Unable to labor or even to walk, he has become reliant on the grudging generosity of others for his matzoh and butter. For decades he has asked for money at this very gate and, evidently, gathers enough to keep body and soul together, but today, things will take a turn. For one thing, both Peter and John look straight at him. They pay attention to him. Not his usual response by a long shot…averted eyes, sneering lips, small change tossed in his general direction, but not today. He is, uncharacteristically, invested in the outcome of this interaction. After hundreds of thousands of rejections over the years we must assume he doesn’t invest himself easily, but he is all in today. And then Peter acts with a level of courage we have not yet seen from him; *silver and gold, I don’t carry those with me, but what I do have is yours. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.*

Former President Trump has gotten a lot of critique from an incident years ago where he mocked a crippled man at a rally. And this busy colonnade, filled with nosy people, could similarly have been a public relations disaster for the early Church. Peter tells this guy, a guy everybody knows has been crippled all his life, to get up and walk! Really? Kinda cruel, on the face of it. But let’s notice that he doesn’t suggest that this man simply do what he would have done decades ago if he were able. He suggests that the power of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, coupled with this man’s own needs and determination, may result in a spectacular outcome. He suggests that the healing gifts of this rabbi from Nazareth – gifts that were well known and had been the buzz around town for years by now – these gifts might be his. He could be healed, after so many years of destitution and desperation. But it will all hinge, as always, on the man’s embracement of the power of Christ.

*Taking him by the right hand, Peter helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.* It is impossible to imagine the kind of joy that filled this fellow. You have grandkids and great-grands, and maybe you have seen the fierce joy that comes to them when they first learn to jump off the couch and realize they will survive the thrill of it. Over and over they leap into the small void, till they fall from exhaustion, jumping and giggling and thrilling to the strength and flexibility and power of their God-given bodies. Now imagine that in a middle-aged man, who, instead of another day being reviled and ignored and scorned, is literally like a little kid jumping off the couch! That kind of joy is contagious! That kind of joy gets the attention of everybody, and they are amazed.

And Peter knows, as every public speaker eventually figures out, that an *amazed* people, a people jarred out of their humdrum everyday routine, is a *receptive* people. And so he speaks up: *“Fellow Israelites, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus.* And if we skip the inserted guilt-slinging about the end of Jesus’ earthly life, his thought continues like this:  *and by faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.* They had *all* heard of Jesus, the infamous rabbi from the north. They had *all* heard stories and tales of miracles and healings, including the unlikely tale of his own death and resurrection, but this was not just a story…they were *witnesses* of this unexplainable healing, not far away and unable to be fact-checked, but right here in their town.

What was reinforced that day was a prime learning within the human experience – that actions *always* speak louder than words. Jerusalem was an international crossroads of philosophy and trade and talk, both religious and secular. Words they had plenty of! Ideas were all around them, all the time, but acts? Proof? These were scarcer than hen’s teeth, but much more impressive. And Peter, emerging leader of the Church in Jerusalem, was learning that preaching wasn’t enough. Breaking bread in Jesus’ name, services of prayer and devotion, not enough. In that swirling pool of thought and beliefs and ideas, actions would carry the day and propel our young faith forward.

We might be looking at a written record of the first altar call in church history…because Peter doesn’t just leave them hanging, wondering how to respond; he frames their possible response like this: *“Now, fellow Israelites, even though you participated in the earthly death of Jesus, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.**But this is how God fulfilled what had been foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—Jesus the Christ.”* Does this sound just like the last half-hour of a Billy Graham crusade to you? Repent, he says, change your minds and hearts about this Jesus, this one who really does have the power to heal and restore, as you have all witnessed. Repent, not only so that the wrong you have done may be expunged, but so that time of refreshing may flow through you from God, and that the long-awaited Messiah will come to you. Repent, be made new, and claim this power and strength for you own.

And so, as usual, we have a choice when a text like this gets opened in our hearing. It can remain for us just more words, the biblical record, data about divinity. Or…we could take a different tack. We could remain creaky aging folks long on words and short on energy, or we could become gleeful couch-jumper-offers again. Do we want more rest, or do we want more zest? Do we follow the Lord of the Trance, or the Lord of the Dance? Every day, every moment, we choose, so let us never, ever forget the power of faithful actions. Amen.