

A Beautiful Gate and Broken Mirrors

We are skipping over an important chapter in Acts for now. Not to worry, we'll return to the fire and wind in a few weeks when we celebrate the Holy Spirit's grand entrance on Pentecost. For now, things seem to have settled into a new normal for the apostles. The end of chapter two tells us that everything is amazing:

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything...Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone.¹

This is the early church we like to imagine, the one we hearken back to when we want to envision a church where everything is just as it should be. Everyone gets along. No one fusses about the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. No one worries over how to pay the light bill. Everyone has what they need. And they gather together for worship and meals. That does sound long ago and far away right now. Everything is simple and right and good. Our text for this morning picks up here. [Read Acts 3:1-10]

Peter and John are heading to worship at the Temple. It's part of their routine as faithful Jews. They are staying in Jerusalem, just as Jesus directed them, and they happen upon a man who is following his own routine. He is being carried in to be placed right in the way, right in the thick of the worshippers' going into and out of the Temple for prayer, just as Peter and John are. Apparently this has been the man's practice for a while now. Each morning he gets someone to carry him into the heart of the city so that he can appeal to faithful worshippers to give him some money. He does this day in and day out. My guess is that he has become part of the landscape, part of the still life that greets men and women heading in to pray. Some probably take pity on him and offer him a coin or two. Maybe some even try to give him food. My guess is that most try to avoid

¹ Acts 2: 42-47, CEB

making eye contact and feel guilty, maybe even resentful. It has become routine, a predictable drama that plays out each and every day, beside the Beautiful Gate.

No one is exactly sure which gate is the Beautiful Gate. There are no other references to this name in scripture or in other ancient texts. Some footnotes in some bibles associate it with one gate in particular. Most agree that this gate was likely covered in silver or gold or bronze. There are nine gates leading into the Temple; some think this was one everyone went through, the entrance between the outer courtyard and the court of women. So it would be an ideal place to ask for gifts, to hope for a coin or two, but I'm guessing for most people the man's appearance is a stark contrast to the Beautiful Gate. It is highly unlikely that anyone refers to him as the "beautiful man" by the Beautiful Gate, if they even notice him at all. But Peter does. The man starts asking for a gift and Peter and John stop and stare at him, my bible says. Didn't Peter's mother tell him that it is not nice to stare? Doesn't he know it's rude? And then, Peter insists that the man look at them. Goodness, Peter. This isn't terribly polite. And yet, there is something beautiful happening at the foot of the Beautiful Gate. A man is being healed, and his healing begins here in this moment when Peter and John look him in the eye, children of God seeing another child of God where others only see a nuisance and a waste.

Peter goes on to take the man's hand and raise him up, raise him to new life. He tells him that he cannot offer him money, because he does not have any. But Peter can give what he does have. He can offer new life and healing in Jesus' name, the very new life and healing Jesus has given Peter himself. While Peter has not known what it is to be dropped off at the gate day in and day out and beg for scraps, he does know what it is to lose hope, to dread the coming dawn, to think he is worth less than nothing. After all, he is the one who declared that he was ready to go to prison and even death with Jesus. And he is the one who denied even knowing Jesus a few hours later. But he is also among the disciples when the risen Jesus appears and tells them not to be afraid. And he is among them when Jesus commissions them to be his witnesses. Peter knows new life and forgiveness and fifty-third chances, because he knows Jesus. And he knows that this good news, this hope and forgiveness and new life is what he can and must offer in Christ's name. He knows the beauty of resurrection, a beauty that far surpasses that of any gleaming gate.

Each week in this odd and strange season, I set things up in my living room so that I can get my iPhone situated just so. I try to clear the cords and the dog bed out of the camera's view. I also try hard to tilt it just right so that you can't really see the mirror behind me, or anything that might be reflected in it unintentionally. This past week, I read yet another article on why our new normal—if it can be considered normal—is so exhausting. I am deeply grateful for the ways we are able to connect using technology, but being “on” much of the time invites a kind of self-scrutiny that is hard for us to avoid and hard for us to withstand. We are trying to interact with others and yet our own image is in front of us constantly. Even if we figure out a way to tilt the camera just so or plug in a fancy fake background, we are stuck staring at ourselves for extended periods of time, stuck comparing ourselves and our surroundings and perhaps even scrutinizing how we and our living rooms and our very lives measure up or not.²

The man beside the Beautiful Gate can only see himself and hear his own thoughts most days. He is his only company, aside from the occasional stranger who happens to toss him some spare change. There is little conversation, little connection, until Peter and John come along. Peter and John see the man for who he is and offer him what they have, as if he is already part of the beloved community. They speak to him as if he is one of their fellow disciples, the ones they have been gathering with, living with, and worshiping with in the wake of Jesus' ascension and the Holy Spirit's arrival. They extend the hand of fellowship and offer him what they have just as they would to anyone who breaks bread and prays with them in that upper room. They see his brokenness and his beloved-ness, the same brokenness and beloved-ness they know and see in themselves.

A few years ago I came across the work of an artist named Bing Wright who took a series of photos of sunsets reflected in broken mirrors. They are far lovelier than any photo I could capture on a beach or a mountaintop. Yes, they are captured by an artist, but the broken glass reflects the colors and the light in a way that no regular photo can. A writer describing the images says:

The final prints are displayed quite large, measuring nearly 4' across by 6' tall, creating what I can only imagine to be the appearance of stained glass windows.³

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/deviced/202004/why-video-chats-are-wearing-us-out>

³ <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2014/04/photographs-of-sunsets-as-reflected-through-shattered-mirrors-by-bing-wright/>

Yes, that is quite large, for a photo. It is the height of a grown man, the width of two people standing side by side. The broken mirrors, these unconventional stained glass windows are life-size, larger than life, even.

If you were to see my life reflected back out at you in that mirror, you would see a house that needs dusting and some stray laundry along with other things that would tell you the truth of what I try to tuck away. Your mirrors would likely show me and others a bit about your mess, your fears, your frustrations, your disappointments, your sadness, or your worry, the things you might rather tuck away, too. Even with the gift of technology, too many of us are having to spend an unusual amount of time staring down all the things in our lives and in ourselves that are not perfect. Feeling pressured to help our children learn, keep our parents safe, pay the bills, and do our jobs perfectly can turn into our own heart-breaking and mind-numbing routine where we feel as if we are barely getting by on crumbs, stuck on the wrong side of a gate—beautiful or not.

But then the voice of Peter captures my attention and calls me back, “Look at me. Look at us. We are broken, too, but in our brokenness we reflect a beauty that does not depend on our saying the right things or having our ducks all in a row. And you reflect that beauty, too. We can’t give you money, but we can give you something no amount of money can buy. We can give you what has been given to us. We can offer a welcome, an invitation not simply to walk but to leap and dance, to celebrate the freedom and new life found in our crucified and risen Savior. You can leave the shadow of the gate. You can stand and sing and shout, not because of us, but because of him. He has a love for broken things and broken people. Because, you see, he was broken, too.”

This is who the church is called to be in this moment and in every moment really. When the voices of fear and suspicion ring with disdain and dismissal, when pride insists that we pretend to be more perfect or stronger than we can ever find a way to be, the church is called to gaze into the eyes of others and offer a different word, an alternate witness. We can give what we have; we can give what the world needs: justice, gentleness, hope, forgiveness, love, rest, mercy, life, and grace. When we stop hiding our broken pieces, and we can show the world the ways we have been washed clean, mended, pieced together, and given 597,386 chances to begin again. We can be exquisite life-sized broken mirrors reflecting God’s beauty, the beauty that invites us and all into new life, even now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.