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MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Empowered

Acts 3:1-10

When in Rome I do as the Romans do, by spending different parts of the day sitting at cafés. My favorite has a commanding view of the only intact and functioning building from early Roman times – the Pantheon. Because of that it's a magnet for tourists and along with them street performers, beggars, and con artists. During a recent summer in the city I noticed while sitting at the café what appeared to be a severely handicapped older lady, her body ravaged with arthritis and other problems. Bent over vertical to the ground and completely shrouded in black she would slowly and painfully make her way from outside café to restaurant to souvenir shop holding a cup in a trembling hand. Along with the stares she would also get coins from sympathetic tourists.

None of the Italians ever offered help and most waiters and shop owners would impatiently shoo her away from the customers. While walking home late one night I saw why; in a narrow side street this poor crippled lady was standing tall while removing her black covering, shawl, scarves, and gloves. It was a girl who was probably seventeen or eighteen, full of health and vigor. She'd been playing a part.

Spending six weeks frequenting the same cafés and seeing the same street people streaming through the crowds you can learn quite a lot if you're observant to more than just the monuments. This girl was part of a gypsy family that had staked out the Pantheon area. Her father and several brothers were street musicians playing a few songs in front of restaurants before shaking cups in front of diners. Her younger sister sold roses, placing one on a table and being stubborn about leaving until she had a few Euros in hand. Her mother sat on a corner with a babe in arms begging, while another sister worked the crowd carrying another baby. They were all working in the family business and when I'd been there long enough and they knew I'd caught on they quit trying and left me alone.

I've read enough to know that this scene has been around since long before the time of Jesus and was certainly present in the time when Peter and John walked through the streets and squares of Jerusalem. Being approached by street performers, beggars, and con artists would have been a part of daily life experience. Regardless of your compassion quotient, you tend to develop a degree of skepticism and thick skin.

While most people in that category finally gave up on me as a source of income there was one who didn't. In Rome now like the Jerusalem of our scripture passage some of

the so-called indigent stake out territory at the entrances of churches and temples. You can't enter or exit without seeing an outstretched hand and hearing, "Signore...Signora, per favore (please). There is a church just off Piazza Navona that I'd adopted as my church away from church. As many of you can have yours in Michigan, Florida, and Arizona, I have mine in Rome. The church dedicated to St. Augustine was built in the 15th century and has in one of its chapels a masterpiece by Caravaggio showing two pilgrims kneeling at the feet of Mary and Jesus. On the way to the café I'd stop there every morning to pray and every day as I'd enter and leave I'd hear "Signore per favore!"

During one visit I overheard a priest explaining in broken English to a complaining tour guide, *"We allow her to stay because her need is genuine. She has no one. Give what you can."*

"Give what you can" is right out of our reading for today and we come to it this morning because I want to extend for just one more week our series on miracles. Call it a bonus, an add on, or an infomercial promise that announces, "But wait, you also get...!" Through Lent and on Easter Sunday we looked at the seven miracles of Jesus found in John's Gospel. They were used by the Gospel writer to demonstrate the messiahship of Christ and explain how many followers came to believe in him. And as we talked about these miracles we came to see that they usually included one or more of the following features: there is an element of the unsuspected, the laws of nature are challenged or changed, and there is the power to calm our fears.

I want to close out our series by turning from the miracles of Jesus to the miracles performed by people like you and me. Today we have a great example through the story of Peter and John raising the possibility that the domain of Jesus isn't ruled by Jesus alone. Peter and John are on their way to a prayer meeting. Sure enough a man crippled from birth, not a con artist, is begging at the entrance to the temple. *"Peter said, 'I don't have a nickel to my name, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!' He grabbed him by the right hand and pulled him up. In an instant his feet and ankles became firm. He jumped to his feet and walked...The man threw his arms around Peter and John ecstatic."*

The operative idea here is "I'll give what I have." They either see or trust that the man is genuine and wanting to help they offer what they can. And we could say that the result includes all three of our miracle features: it comes unexpectedly, it changes the laws of nature, and it calms fears. He is healed and ecstatic. He doesn't get money but something he probably had resigned himself to thinking was beyond the realm of possibility.

Life Observation # 1 I imagine you'll agree that quite often what we can give may be better than what someone wants or thinks they need. I like how the Message version of the Bible puts it: *"he asked for a handout. Peter with John at his side, looked him straight in the*

eye and said, 'Look here.' He looked up, expecting to get something from them." Some of the most admired people in our world and communities are those who won't give up to give. If they can't give what has been requested that's not the end of the exchange, they go on to dig in their pockets determined to find and impart something that will help and transform.

The details of the story have escaped me, but I remember reading about a doctor whose friend, ravaged with cancer, lay dying at home. He couldn't bring the healing powers that everyone so wanted to receive but he was also an accomplished cellist and giving what he had believed he could invoke some soothing powers. Every afternoon for a few hours he'd bring his cello and play the music he knew his friend loved. It was an event that served to calm the fear. He didn't give up to give.

Aren't there ways that kind of action translates into our lives? Yesterday the son of one of our members graduated from Indiana University. Four years ago that young man was distraught and angry, upset because of the circumstances that kept him from attending his first choice of Princeton. His parents gave him what they could and today he is like the man in our story...ecstatic. He found a field that captured his passion, he's engaged to a fine young woman, and has come to terms with an affliction he's carried for all of his mature life. "Thank God my parents offered I.U." he said "for none of this would have happened otherwise." His parents didn't give up to give and as a result a profound transformation occurred.

Life Observation #2 Peter and John may have been able to give the extra-ordinary, but there is no reason not to believe that giving the ordinary can generate miracle moments. Galaudet University is the historic college for the deaf and hearing impaired. American Sign Language is the campus norm. While one would assume that the deaf are the most proficient so are hearing children born to parents that are deaf.

One of these children, Sam Goshen, a graduate of Galaudet, was doing some mission work in Afghanistan last year. He came across a family with a son who was deaf. While they'd managed to create a rough form of communicating the young boy felt isolated, unable to interact with people beyond the family. Unaware of Sam's background they asked for help. No Jesus restoration of healing miracle in this case, but an "I'll give you what I have" response from Sam. He introduced the boy to the wonderful world of sign language. He learned that what he couldn't do with his voice he could do with his hands. And now there are plans to bring him to Galaudet. Not the extra-ordinary but the ordinary yet like the man in our scripture story the boys is...ecstatic. A miracle?...your call; unexpected, a challenge to nature, and a calming of fears.

Life Observation #3 We can't deal with this topic without acknowledging that sometimes we have exactly what people need and request and once offered the

outcome brings so much more. All that is hoped for are a few coins yet the door is opened for a miracle moment.

Day after day I'd walk into the church, and after being humbled by the priest's comments to the tour guide I'd drop a few coins in the lady's hand. So much so that I'd make sure I had something to give before I left the apartment in the morning. With the priest's words "She has no one" ringing in my mind I would pause to say a few words...then some sentences, and finally a little more. For me the lady at the door became Astasia and for her signore became Giovanni. There was no more trace of a tight lipped worn frown but an excited and happy "Giovanni, good morning!" Her hand ceased to be outstretched at all yet I'd be digging into my pockets. A miracle?...your call; unexpected, a challenge to nature, and a calming of fears. I think so. I hope to see Astasia again at my church away from church. Ecstatic.

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