

PASS THE BATON

I thought of a lot of titles for today's sermon, but settled on the unimaginative – “Pass the baton” – because none of the others said enough, and this one was safe– it says the obvious.

I think most of us have run a relay race when we were in high school .. or... at least we are familiar with the race.

The difficult aspect of the race,... besides running very fast,.. is the hand off of the baton.

The baton signifies “responsibility”.

Sometimes, the next runner “Gets it” sometimes it is dropped.

Passing the baton is a way of saying what is going on in the post Easter narrative; however, merely telling runners to hand off the baton will not ensure a successful exchange.

Sometimes..... saying what to do is NOT enough.

The Luke passage, that we read, presents the familiar post resurrection encounter Jesus had with the disciples.

No doubt it is a very crazy time – everything is new and unfolding.

Jesus, their beloved leader, has been killed,... yet his body is missing and there are rumours that he is alive,... which is mortally impossible.

And, likely the followers of Jesus are feeling that their lives are in danger, too..... unless they lay low, keep quiet and hide.

Then, in the midst of their high anxiety, Jesus appears..... like a ghost. Like an aberration, Jesus is suddenly with his frightened, timid disciples.

** Christianity / the church began from this humbling situation!

We must never forget that.

We derive insight and guidance from the life and message of Jesus, BUT

Our Spiritual faith journey, the divine power of Christ in our lives... begins, as it did with the disciples, with a humbling and illuminating encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

We are not merely people with high ideals who embrace peace and justice because it makes sense or because we believe it is the right thing to do.

We are NOT JUST admirers or advocates for Jesus.

The children of God **possess the life, death and ... Resurrection of Jesus**,...the whole story and that is powerful!

Something huge / something magnificent happened to those disciples. They were broken and afraid. They were paralysed with fear, Yet in the book of Acts we read about how bold and empowered they had become. They were changed, radically changed.

Another of today's passage, we didn't read, is from Acts 3, and from that passage comes an example of their change.

At this point, Jesus was no longer on the earth with them.

One afternoon, at 3 o'clock—the designated hour for daily prayer, Peter and John were going up to the temple to pray. As they were going in, they saw a lame man being placed by the gate so that he could beg for money. This man had been born lame. He never had walked, and every day he would be taken to the temple, to sit by the gate called the “Beautiful Gate.” There he would beg for money. He had become a fixture, like the homeless people in Toronto.

To get attention, he would call out to those entering the temple.

On this day, he called out to Peter and John and asked them for some loose change. Most people learned to ignore him. Instead,

Peter and John both looked intently at him, and Peter said, “Look at us.”

That is a strange thing to say. It is unusual to talk to beggars. It is most unusual to tell them to look at you.

So, the lame beggar did. He fixed his attention on them, and then there is more surprise. Peter said, “I have no silver or gold.”

We can only imagine what the beggar thought, but ... Peter continued, and said, “...BUT..... what I have I give you.”

..... “What I have I give you.”

Peter was giving the man what he was given..... by Jesus.

Instead of using the words Jesus used, “Peace be with you”, Peter said, What I have I give you;

In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”

Evoking a name is presenting the person – all of the person.

Peter then reached out to the man and took his right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.

The once lame man, started leaping and jumping, and then walked into the temple with Peter and John. All the people recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the gate, and all the people were filled with amazement and wonder.

As today, the people then were enthralled by the physical, *magical* change, and failed to appreciate what really was going on. They were stuck on the physical healing, and missed the big picture.

Peter realized their fixation, and spoke to the crowd. The once lame man was still clinging to Peter as he spoke. *I suppose in complete admiration and appreciation.*

Peter addressed the people, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk.”

Peter went on to boldly point out that the healing came from God ... by believing in Jesus,.... the very Jesus **they had killed**. Peter added that he was a witness to the resurrected Jesus, and that they could find forgiveness by repenting. They were not without hope.

In this episode, Jesus the person, the message, the **Messiah** was at the centre of this. Something powerful happened, and it had to do with Jesus.

A beggar was healed, and that is impressive,.....BUT have we picked up on the pattern, yet?
???? ?????

I don't recall any Jesus stories about healing a rich man with arthritis.

Jesus never bought anyone a new house. He didn't conquer the Roman army and liberate Israel. And, I don't believe that evoking the name of Jesus will get the Maple Leafs the Stanley Cup this year.

Yes, the New Testament accounts includes some amazing miracles, but most of them deal with powerless, insignificant people.

In the 1970's musical "Jesus Christ Superstar", Judas raises the same question – why waste the magical power on the little things?

Why heal a lame man who was basically ignored by the temple gate?

There is a pattern here, and today's passages prompt us to be illuminated:

Peter states in Acts 3: 17 that the people were once ignorant.

In First John 3 we are warned not to be deceived, and in the Luke story, Jesus deals with the disciples' disbelief.

They were "paralysed" with fear and Jesus "healed" them.

The disciples, before receiving the resurrected Christ, were broken and full of doubt, but believed once they encountered Jesus.

To the least, to the weak, to the low point, to the broken –the open door, Jesus comes in and presents self.

Perhaps, part of the power of the Messiah is the love and passion to see hope where most never look for hope.

Jesus talked with the woman at the well. He asked for a drink from her, but that was just the beginning.

Peter and John stopped to talk with the beggar, why? Why when it is much easier to go on by,..... but connecting with the beggar made a huge difference for the beggar, for Peter and John and for everyone.

When I was in high school, there was this guy that got picked on a lot. He was Not COOL. He was a nerd. He really did wear a pocket protector full of pens. He wore his pants way too high, and it was obvious that his parents didn't have much money.

It seems, most people tend to like to have someone to tease / pick on.... because it means that they / "We" are not the ones being picked on.

This guys name was Craig Fluck. Even his name was a liability. Some of the "bullies" would do rude things to him, and people like me were content to watch. But, then for some strange reason, he decided to start going to my church and attend the youth group, too. That really complicated things.

However, Something magical happened. His decision to accept us, invited us to accept him. I do believe God's Spirit was active in all this, because I keenly recall talking with my best friend about what to do, and we felt inspired to make Craig a friend..... which included defending and protecting him at school. We stood up for him. For example, I remember warning him that his locker had been sabotaged—everything was set to fall out when he opened it. Those who were picking on him realized their antics were not going to work, so they stopped picking on him. He was befriended by others. Healing and Restoration happened. It was a miracle.

Craig was one of eight children. His family lived in a three bedroom home. They were poor, but it didn't matter anymore.

Craig went on to get his Master's degree in socialogy.

Craig is still a very good friend of mine. He lives in Georgia and he given his life to work with troubled and thrown away youth.

Another story:

Camille lived next door to me when I was at seminary. She was my daughter Jessica's age, but..... not really. Camille had Downs Syndrome. She did not go to school with Jessica; she went to a different sort of school. Camille was special, and I mean that. She was a gift.

Every day, as I walked home from classes—burdened and weary, she would call out to me from her front porch, "Hi Gordon. How are you doing? Beautiful day isn't it. I love you." I love you. And, quite often, she would walk over and give me a big hug.

She was amazing. She was a miracle from God. She helped sustain me.

One more story:

I once had a neighbour who rarely talked to anyone. He did a poor job of talking care of his yard; the grass was often over grown. He kept his blinds closed, and I thought he was rather peculiar and rude. Of course, I didn't try to connect with him.... because he wasn't very inviting; he didn't seem very kind.

As, I was loading furniture to move away to go to seminary, I commented to another neighbour that I wouldn't miss that old guy. I was then informed of his story. Without going into details, he had lived a very hard and sad life. He was beaten down,..... and I didn't invite a miracle by trying to connect with him. I felt ashamed, and Jesus was Not present; Jesus was not invited in, and I was partly to blame.

I regret my ignorance.

The miracle is NOT in what we Can do, ... but rather in what we Can NOT do.

Jesus brings God into what is broken , to who is persecuted and ignored, to those who are weak and to all that are hurt and afraid.

Jesus approached his fearful and doubting disciples Not with a sword or magic wand, but instead with the humble invitation to touch his wounds.

Christianity / the church began with “here are my wounds – feel them.”

Our Journey with God begins in much the same way,.....

We cry out, “here are my wounds..... And God replies, .. “Here are my wounds”.....you know them as Jesus... Once you touch them.... then, we can walk together..... you are my child.”

And, we respond to the beggar, who calls out “here are my wounds, and we answer.....Here are my wounds,.....In the power of Jesus name.

Amen.”

You now have the baton.