

“Healing Creation”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Edina Morningside Community Church; April 26, 2020

**Acts 3:1-10**

*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. And a man lame from birth was being carried in. People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate so that he could ask for alms from those entering the temple. When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, “Look at us.” And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit and ask for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

I heard an interview this week with a farmer in rural Minnesota, describing how the work stoppage at pork-processing plants is creating chaos in her farm practices. Because there is no working plant to process her pork, she can't sell the pigs she has on hand. She could maintain her current stock until conditions change, but like other farmers she's contracted to receive thousands more baby piglets this spring. When they arrive, there will be no space to put them in, and because sales have nearly halted, there will be no money for the months of food necessary to grow them into adult hogs. The only recourse that she hinted at was euthanasia. Indeed, [MinnPost reported](#) this week that “COVID-19-related plant shutdowns could force hog farmers to kill and dispose of 200,000 pigs.”

I grew up on a farm that raised pigs for the slaughterhouse. I regularly eat pork and other meat. I'm not naïve to how demand for cheap, daily meat has created a factory farming system that breeds, raises and kills billions of animals. Yet this story is a striking, memorable example of the distorted relationship between humans and the Earth. Humanity harvests and consumes according to our need or pleasure. The rest of creation—including all of animal and plant life—exists as raw material to be modified, used or disposed of as we see fit. We are the subject that matters, and the Earth is an object that matters only to the extent it serves human desires. Is this really what God intended with the Genesis 1 command that humanity keep, guard and steward the rest of creation?

Another distorted relationship is revealed in today's Bible story. We hear of a man unable to walk, begging by the Beautiful Gate as passersby go into the temple. He is seen all the time, passed by hundreds, maybe thousands of people, on their way into and out from afternoon prayers. Their two good feet allow them to go into the Jerusalem temple and worship, in the holy place where he is forbidden because of his imperfect, crippled legs. So there he sits each day like one of the anonymous faces on our city streets, holding a sign or calling out for a little bit of money. The best this man can hope for are these coins, dropped by passersby as an act of ritual piety. Mutuality is missing; the interactions here are subject and object, giver and beggar.

But one day this man who is lame sees two people passing by into the temple. As it happens, they are Peter and John, followers of Christ. He asks them for alms as he has already done a hundred times today. But what comes next has never happened before—it is beyond his wildest imagination. Peter looks intently at him—John looks at him too! The beggar locks eyes with these disciples, who see him not as an object in their path but as a child of God full of promise, vitality and life. He is more than the disability and the begging, more than the ritually unclean reject outside the temple, more than the poverty which has him still reaching out a hand to them. Peter and John see him truly, made in the image of the God who has

brought him into the world, nurtured him to this point, and who will be there waiting with an eternal embrace at the end of life.

And with the seeing of mutual recognition, seeing through the eyes of faith, comes a natural response. Not something surface or artificial, like cash which they don't have. Instead they offer what they do have: "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Peter takes him by the right hand and raises him up. Immediately the man's feet and ankles are strengthened beyond what they have ever been like his whole life. He jumps up, stands, begins to walk, then leaps and praises God with utter joy! Describing this interaction, [Ryan J. Pemberton writes](#) that "Seeing and being seen in a way that is neither dependent on our economic need nor an opportunity for economic gain is a prerequisite to authentic relationships—relationships that offer vulnerability, healing, and even resurrection." In other words, recognizing the God-blessedness in others can lead from objectification to mutuality, healing, and restoration of life.

One of my professors in seminary was the Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui Lan, who one day asked us to take off our shoes while she taught us a remarkable song. I don't remember how the melody goes, but the words were an invitation and instruction. She sang: "Walk softly on the earth; massage her with your feet, for remember when you're walking, you walk on your mother's face." That last line caught me with shock and surprise, almost offense. But I've never forgotten the different relationship to creation that this line suggests. Humans are not dominant subjects extracting resources from objects of creation, the so-called "raw materials" of mineral, plant and animal life. Rather, creation is the best kind of mother, one with whom we have a tender, mutual and loving relationship. Kwok Pui Lan's song put graphic urgency to what is often a shorthand slogan. How are we walking on the face of Mother Earth? How might we walk more softly, massaging her with our feet instead?

The last we see of the man in Acts 3, he is walking as an equal with the disciples: no more alone and unseen, but in the company of others who have seen him. Even more impressive than the healing of his legs is the healing of this man's isolation. The power of Christ and the recognition of shared humanity has moved him from loneliness to companionship. With none of them kept outside the Beautiful Gate as inferior, unclean or unworthy, all three men go into the temple together, praising God for all to see.

When I think about those baby pigs in rural Minnesota, I remember book *Charlotte's Web*. It describes how barnyard animals have their own thoughts, emotions and subjectivity. The story unfolds with conversations among animals like Wilbur the pig, Templeton the rat, and Charlotte the spider. Humans are powerful outside actors who influence the animal world, and their decisions threaten the life of young Wilbur, the runt of his litter. The fates of these animals change when Charlotte is able to catch the attention of humans, spinning webs that announce Wilbur as "TERRIFIC", "RADIANT", and "HUMBLE". Over the course of the story, humans grow to regard Wilbur as a creature of worth and value, "SOME PIG" in the words of Charlotte's web, and not just a farm animal useful for his meat.

This is a children's story, but there's a moral for all of us. God calls us to the healing of creation, and that starts with being healed ourselves. Can we grow beyond blind presumptions of our importance over the rest of the Earth? How might we—today—notice and value the inherent worth of the non-human world? How might we serve as better caretakers of the carbon, forests, and creatures that God has called us to steward with wisdom? Can we be like the spider Charlotte—using our webs and whatever else we can do to proclaim the beauty and wonder of all life? Easter's resurrection continues in the great and small miracles by which we recognize God-created worth in both human and non-human neighbors, then walk softly with the earth through another Beautiful Gate, worshipping God alongside every corner of creation. Amen.