

Transformation U: **Reconnecting with the Community Near Us**

Psalm 19 • Acts 3:1–13a

This fall, we have been exploring how God is positioning our fellowship to do great things for the Kingdom! Many of these features involve us getting closer to Jesus, and then focusing our energies outward, toward those who need it most. We are calling this exploration, “Transformation U,” and we only have two more Sundays in the series—this week and next. On November 12, we will have the first of our Congregational Conversations and Potlucks to talk about how God is guiding us as a fellowship. This week, we are spending time with a very cool story from Acts that has some surprising insights for us.

Acts 3:1 Peter and John were going to the temple courtyard for the three o’clock prayer. ² At the same time, a man who had been lame from birth was being carried by some men. Every day these men would put the lame man at a gate in the temple courtyard. The gate was called Beautiful Gate. There he would beg for handouts from people going into the courtyard. ³ When the man saw that Peter and John were about to go into the courtyard, he asked them for a handout.

Acts 3:4 Peter and John stared at him. “Look at us!” Peter said. ⁵ So the man watched them closely. He expected to receive something from them. ⁶ However, Peter said to him, “I don’t have any money, but I’ll give you what I do have. Through the power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, walk!” ⁷ Peter took hold of the man’s right hand and began to help him up. Immediately, the man’s feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ Springing to his feet, he stood up and started to walk. He went with Peter and John into the temple courtyard. The man was walking, jumping, and praising God.

Acts 3:9 All the people saw him walking and praising God. ¹⁰ They knew that he was the man who used to sit and beg at the temple’s Beautiful Gate. The people were amazed and stunned to see what had happened to him. ¹¹ They were excited, and everyone ran to see them at the place called Solomon’s Porch. The man wouldn’t let go of Peter and John.

Acts 3:12 When Peter saw this, he said to the people, “Men of Israel, why are you amazed about this man? Why are you staring at us as though we have made him walk by our own power or godly life? ¹³ The God of our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has glorified his servant Jesus.

Many years ago, Mordecai Ham, the famous preacher, was getting ready to come out on stage. He was in a large auditorium because no church in town was big enough to hold the crowd. There were a couple of teenage boys that went to this worship service. It was packed out and they couldn’t find a seat, so they decided to leave. But one, lone usher saw those two teenage boys, and he said, “Come here, guys. I’ll find you a seat.” A lot of us may feel like this usher—overworked and unappreciated, expected to make miracles happen with less. And so often we feel like everything we do just doesn’t make a difference, like we are spinning our

wheels and going nowhere fast. At times, the pandemic really multiplied that feeling—decisions were being made in the school or at our work or in the community, and we didn't have a lot of say. At times, the pandemic demanded that we find solutions or make do with no solution—figure out the kids, figure out work—figure it out! Into our sense of inadequacy and meaninglessness, God speaks three words that change everything!

First, we are where we are for a reason. In our passage for today, we drop in on Peter and John in the early days of the church—and we discover they were part of the neighborhood. They know this guy who can't walk—he's always there. They know how he gets to that spot where he asks people for money every day. During the pandemic, many of us rediscovered our neighborhoods—going for walks, talking with neighbors—socially distanced of course—helping each other out, making sure everyone was ok. There's a reason you live where you do—and it may be the people around you! Do you know their names, and about their life? And there's a reason you work and play, take your kids or grandkids to dance or sports, or go to the doctor where you do—and it just might be one of the people you find there. I know, some days you just don't feel like it, or they seem too busy, but who knows when simple greetings, smiles, or learning people's names will open a door for blessing. Right then, we remember why we are—to show Jesus' love and grace to each person. We are where we are for a reason.

Second, look for the real need. For Peter and John, they not only know this guy who can't walk, they know what he needs. They say, "I don't have any money, but I'll give you what I do have. Through the power of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, walk!" One of my favorite human beings is Doris Simmons. At last count, she was 92 and in a skilled nursing facility because her arthritis makes it hard for her to walk. One day, she told me the staff in her facility were wondering how long they could stay because the new management was focused only on the bottom line. How does she know? Because she cares about the people around her, she continues to talk with them about their lives, and she stays curious about their real needs? You know what? She's praying for all the staff, and she's praying for the management of the new company! Do we know our neighbors well enough to know how to pray for their real needs? In all of the places we go, you and I run into people all the time, and we just never know when God will give us an opportunity to hear what someone really needs.

Third, grace creates community. Peter and John are super clear that it's not their power that did this miracle—it was the power of Jesus at work through them, and curious things happened after. One was the guy who couldn't walk—starts walking, then running, then jumping and praising God, which sounds like it might have been really hilarious to watch. But his gratitude and the changes in his life? They affect everyone else who knows this guy, so much so, that Peter has to explain what Jesus has done. When we have relationships with our neighbors, and our co-workers, and the people at the store, and the people in class—and we begin to learn how to pray for them, the great news is this: Jesus is smiling because we are creating community! Oh we didn't really mean to. We thought we were just being kind, thoughtful and curious, but suddenly it becomes clear—by helping our neighbor, we are making a better neighborhood. By being a blessing to our co-worker, we are creating a better workplace. By showing grace to someone at school or the grocery store or the playground, we are helping our community get stronger. Grace creates community!

These post-pandemic lessons are ones for our fellowship too. Thom Rainer, in his book, *The Post-Quarantine Church*, argues that the post-pandemic church has to learn that it is primarily for the community, not primarily for its members. That's going to be hard for some of us to hear, because some of us think this church exists only for its members. But Jesus is

always focusing His grace outward—bringing wholeness, peace and joy to our lives—and hoping we will pass that grace on to others, to ripple through the world. If grace creates community, then our fellowship is here to help Jesus mold and shape Salt Lake City into a blessed community. That means all our ministries, and all our resources, find their best expression touching people’s lives with grace. In the post-pandemic era, we are reminded that welcoming and loving on people is the core of living out the grace of God.

So if you are feeling overwhelmed by change, like nothing you do is making a difference, consider for a moment that overworked, under-appreciated usher, trying to find seats so these two, teen-age boys could see the stage. The usher looked around in the auditorium until he found two seats right down front. That night, both those boys gave their lives to Jesus Christ because of that usher and that small act of love and kindness. One of those boys was named Billy Graham. Have you heard of him? Most of us haven’t heard of Mordecai Ham, but millions and millions of people will be in heaven because of the ministry of Billy Graham. All because of one usher taking time to promise, “I’ll find you a seat.” When he got to heaven, do you think that usher got any credit for some of Billy Graham’s ministry? Count on it! He did his part. We never know how a seemingly insignificant thing we do from kindness can turn the tides of history. By faith, we know we are where we are for a reason, and so we look for how God might be working. Then we do what we can now—even what seems meaningless—trusting God will bless it. By faith, we look for the real needs around us, and we love with our whole heart, knowing God will touch those we touch. By faith, we show grace to those who need it most—the lost, the last and the least, the clueless and the clued in—trusting that in our welcome, the grace of Jesus Christ will be felt. By faith, we become a way our neighbors and all the people around us reconnect with the One, Who longs to shower all of us with grace.