

The Beautiful Gate

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 22, 2016
Text: Acts 3:1-10

The Beautiful Gate. When we read or hear this story from the Book of Acts, these three little words barely make an impression. We sort of take them for granted, assuming automatically that all the gates of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem had names and that this was just one of them. After all, why else would the author of Acts include this little detail? He must have been trying to lend additional credibility to the whole story by setting it in a real location that would be instantly recognizable to his audience. Makes sense.

The only problem is that this reference in Acts to the Beautiful Gate is the only place that name is used. None of the other written descriptions of the Temple of that time use the name “Beautiful Gate” to describe any of the entrances to the Temple. Some of those gates do have names – like the Shushan Gate that led to what was known as Solomon’s Porch or the Nicanor Gate, a magnificent brass gate so well known that it was described in detail in the works of the ancient historian Josephus and elsewhere. It has been suggested that perhaps one of these gates was the “Beautiful Gate” because they were in fact beautiful but we don’t know that to be the case. The only thing we know for

sure about the Beautiful Gate is that the name meant something significant to the author of this story in Acts.

This fascinates me. If the gate where this incredible, and very significant healing story, had another, more well-known name, it only makes sense that the author would have used that name – precisely to lend even more reality to the story. But that’s not what happened here. So where was the Beautiful Gate? Or perhaps even more importantly, what was the Beautiful Gate? The text is specific that this is the location where the friends or family of the lame man brought him to work each day. And he was working, doing the only thing he could do – beg for money from people who were visiting the Temple. This was how he earned his living and, frankly, it was probably fairly lucrative because he was at a Temple gate. He would catch people going into the Temple to pray or make sacrifice, perhaps trying to atone for some sin they had committed. Or he might catch them on the way out, after they had made their peace with God and were feeling grateful. In either situation they would have been very happy to give the lame man money, an act which in itself was thought to bring special blessing to the giver.

The text tells us that this man had been lame since birth, so he would not have known any other way of life. He didn’t know what it was to walk on his own to get where he wanted or needed to go. He didn’t know what it was like to take a walk in the misty

shimmering of dawn or the gentle coolness of the evening. He didn't know what it was to wade out into the refreshing river waters on a hot, dusty day. He only knew what it was to be carried to the Beautiful Gate each morning where he would lay for hours, begging from strangers. So, when he asked Peter and John for money, and they stopped, he thought he knew what was going to happen. They looked at him intently, the text says, and then they asked him to look at them which he did. Expectantly is the word the author uses to describe the scene. That's when Peter upset the man's whole world. Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold to give you but I will give you what I have. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk." That was the first time those words, "in the name of Jesus of Nazareth," were ever used to preface an action of healing – a miracle – done by someone other than Jesus. A truly momentous moment for the man, certainly, but just as much for Peter and John.

And, it worked! They helped the man to his feet and he was healed. "Immediately his feet and ankles were made strong" the text says. He got up and started walking around for the first time in his life! Imagine that! So, naturally, he followed the two men who had made this happen into the Temple. And can't we just imagine what he's saying to anyone who would listen – "What just happened? How did you do that? I can't believe it – I'm walking! I'm running! I'm leaping, for heaven's sake! What just happened

to me??” And the people recognized him as the guy who had sat by the Beautiful Gate for as long as they could remember, begging for money. How could he possibly be walking around? They were filled with wonder and amazement indeed!

So, when I read this story, when I think about this story, I find myself wondering if the Beautiful Gate became known by this name *after* the lame man was healed there. I wonder if it *became* beautiful as this fantastic, miraculous story was told over and over again – by the man who was healed, by the people who knew him before and after, and by Peter and John who knew the truth. They knew that when they spoke those words and reached for his hands to pull him to his feet that they had never done that kind of healing before. They would do it many times after, but this was the first time they had done it on their own – in the name of the Resurrected Jesus rather than standing by the side of Jesus as he healed the sick and the lame, the blind and the wretched. This time Peter and John had done the healing – and it was a beautiful thing! That’s how the Beautiful Gate became beautiful in the memories of all whose lives were transformed in that moment when a lame man walked for the very first time.

I actually know of another Beautiful Gate. It is a real gate named the Beautiful Gate and everyone who knows of it knows exactly where it is when it is given as a reference point. This Beautiful Gate is at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, CT

and it stands at a key point where the boundary of the enclosure of this cloistered order abuts the public portions of the Abbey grounds where visitors are free to roam. I learned about the Beautiful Gate during my first visit to the Abbey years ago. Every visitor who stays at the Abbey learns about the Beautiful Gate because that's where you go to meet the nun with whom you have been assigned to work. At least, most times that's where you meet her. You go to the Gate at the time specified in the note you would have received at mass that morning, or perhaps been given in a phone message at the guest home. Actually, you usually arrive a little early because you're not quite sure if the nun will come a little early and you don't want her to think you're not appreciative of the chance to get to know her through this joint task you are about to tackle together. And then, usually, you wait. And you wait on a little bench that sits just outside the Gate.

The interesting thing is that the Gate is wide open. I've actually never seen it shut in all the times I've been there. It might be shut on special occasions – like when a new sister is being received into the order, but I'm not sure. I do know it's one of two gates in the enclosure fence, the other one being further down the driveway. That one is never open. But the Beautiful Gate always is and you sit literally beside it to wait for the sister assigned to come fetch you. You cannot go into the enclosure until she arrives, a fact made clear in your instructions. So you sit

and wait, straining to see into the enclosure as far as you can from that little bench, which isn't very far. As you wait, you wave to the other nuns and visitors walking by, usually each on their way to do something. Sometimes you wait only a few minutes. Other times you wait as long as a half hour. But, if you're serious about wanting to work behind the enclosure, within the confines of what is considered sacred space, you wait as long as you need to wait and you do so patiently.

This took me a long time to understand. It took me even longer to appreciate it as a spiritual discipline, because surely that is what it is. As a visitor your wait at the Beautiful Gate becomes what you make of it. If you let it, it can become a time of impatience and irritation as you wait to go and do what you are assured will be some form of dirty, sweaty, manual labor – weeding the gardens, spreading manure or hay in the gardens, harvesting beans from the gardens in a very precise way. My time is valuable, you start to fume. But, if you are open to it, that moment is when you realize just how out of whack your life has become because you're actually annoyed with a nun who devotes her whole life to God while you run around like a chicken with your head cut off. That's when you really start to appreciate the wonder of the Abbey and the space it offers to experience time in a new, sacred way. That's when you are transformed by the Beautiful Gate as your waiting time slips into a new reality of rest

and renewal in the luscious quiet that enfolds you so completely, so uniquely at the Abbey.

Dear Friends, as we consider this ancient story of transformation, of new life, which began in such an ordinary place – a gate leading from one place to another – God is inviting us to pause and ponder deeply our own lives and where we are within them. By what gateway do you find yourself waiting and what are you waiting for? How is God a part of your waiting, or not? If not, why not and what might you need to do to invite God in to your waiting? Dear Friends, our lives are filled with places of waiting. We wait in doctor's offices and in line at the grocery store and the bank and the pharmacy. We wait for the light to change when we're driving in traffic and we wait for someone to back out of a parking spot we want. Sometimes when we are waiting, time seems to crawl and we feel stuck. Other times as we wait, the time flies by and before we know it, what we had waited for, anticipated for so long, is over and done. Waiting is part and parcel of our lives every day. That means what we do with waiting time is important.

Of course, the what of our waiting often has so much to do with the where. In other words, where we are waiting and why we are waiting is critical to the how of our waiting. And that's the lesson of the story of the Beautiful Gate. The lame man didn't even know he was waiting for his life to change forever. He didn't

know another life was possible for him. He didn't realize that transformation to a new way of life was coming to him that day until it had already happened. And that's how the Holy Spirit works if we let it. We wait and wait for who knows what and while we wait, life slides on by. But is that really what God wants for you? Is that really what God wants for us in this church? Or does God want more for us, knowing so much is possible that we can't even imagine as we sit and wait?

The Beautiful Gate is so much more than a nice name. The Beautiful Gate in this story of transformation is beautiful because *we* are beautiful and special and significant to God. The transformation we can experience at all the Beautiful Gates of our lives happens when we dare to believe our lives *can be* transformed. In those moments we dare to believe that God sees beauty and possibility in each of us, just as we are. The truth is, dear friends, that the Beautiful Gate is where we find ourselves waiting every day for what God has in store for us as individuals and as a church. We know this because Jesus tells us over and over again in everything he says and does that transformation to new life is always possible. So, what are you waiting for and what might God have in mind for you instead? Wait and see, trusting that God's love for you, God's faith in you just as you are, is never ending Amen.