



September 29, 2019

Sermon Series: **our church. our future.**

God Removes Barriers and Welcomes All  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Acts 3:1-10 NRSV**

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for alms. <sup>4</sup>Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." <sup>5</sup>And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. <sup>6</sup>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." <sup>7</sup>And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. <sup>8</sup>Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. <sup>9</sup>All the people saw him walking and praising God, <sup>10</sup>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.

We'll soon be making lefse for our Christmas Bazaar. Time for a quick survey: How many of you like lefse? If you like lefse, how many of you like it either with brown sugar or white sugar? And do you like it at room temperature or heated up in the microwave? And finally, how many of you aren't sure what lefse is and have no idea what I'm talking about?

For those who don't know, lefse is the Norwegian version of a flour tortilla. It's soft and it rolls up nicely. It's a delicacy we make at Zumbro when we want to celebrate our roots as Norwegian Lutherans. As we heard last week from Pastor Lisa, our roots go all the way back to the end of the Civil War. We started in 1865.

Lefse, of course, is often paired with lutefisk - a whitefish soaked in lye. A few more survey questions: How many of you like lutefisk? How many of



you don't? How many of you don't even want to try it? From what I've heard, after moving into the new building in 1969, Pastor Haugen requested that there be no Saturday night lutefisk dinners because the odor was much too strong when he got into the pulpit on Sunday morning. There was just one time when a couple's club went a little crazy and boiled up a batch down in the Fireside Room. And the next day, everyone could smell it. Who knows, maybe that's when the decision was made to serve meatballs at the Bazaar.

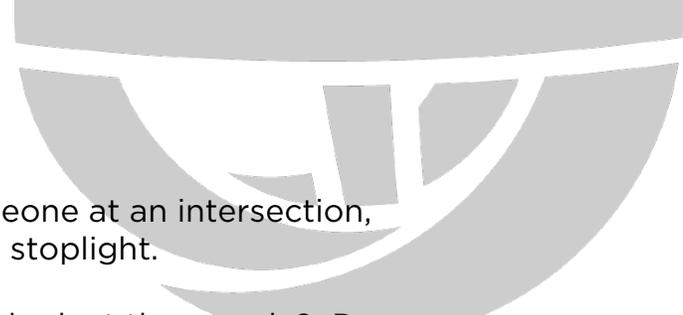
Lutefisk and lefse are comfort foods for those of Norwegian descent. I'm one of them. They make us feel warm and cozy inside. And when we eat them, truth be told, we're usually not thinking about people from Germany or South Sudan or Mexico. Much as I like my lefse - with white sugar and heated up in the microwave - I wonder if sometimes we get a bit too cozy when talking about it. And does our coziness ever become a barrier, unintentionally keeping some people out?

In Acts 2, the early church is in a cozy spot too. Easter has happened. The day of Pentecost has come and gone, with the Holy Spirit poured into the hearts of believers. They hold their possessions in common. They gather in homes to hear the apostles' teaching. They break bread in worship and eat meals together with glad and generous hearts. You can imagine them eating their own version of lutefisk and lefse, which might have been fish from the Sea of Galilee and pita bread. It's comfort food. Their gatherings are filled with close fellowship. The word in Greek is *koinonia*. But again, as with our Norwegian roots, perhaps there are times when it's a little too cozy.

Look what happens in chapter 3. Peter and John are going to the temple to pray. It's 3:00 in the afternoon. They meet up with a man who's been lame since birth. He sits at the gate day after day, and for good reason. People will be walking by on the way to the temple, and good Jews are obligated to give alms to the poor. As the worshippers come, the lame man is keenly aware that he's not allowed inside the temple. His handicap is considered a blemish. For all intents and purposes, it's an insurmountable barrier.

What do you suppose the worshippers are thinking as they walk by the man? Maybe they're thinking some of the same things we do when coming face to face with someone in great need. Perhaps you've seen the man on a bike who parks at Hy-Vee. We're not sure if the man has a home or not. The solar panels he carries with him are used to charge his phone. Or maybe you've seen the man who lives in a white van. He often parks across the street from the church. We're pretty sure the van *is* his home, at least





until winter arrives. Or maybe you've seen someone at an intersection, looking for a handout from those waiting at the stoplight.

So, what do you do in these instances? Do you look at the people? Do you give them anything? Do you make an effort to get to know them?

The lame man approaches Peter and John and asks for a handout. To their credit, Peter and John don't look away. I often do, but they don't. Instead, they look intently at the man. Why? What are they looking for? A heart full of pain and sorrow, ready to be touched by God's healing love? A sincere spirit, ready to receive more than he'd asked for? Whatever it is they're looking for, there's something vital about this face-to-face contact. Not only do Peter and John stare at him, they invite him to stare back at them. Clearly, what's about to happen involves a deep human connection, as well as a deep work of God.

Peter speaks to the man: "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Before you know it, the now-healed man is walking and leaping and praising God. And get this, he's doing it *inside* the temple. Suddenly there's room for him there. A seemingly insurmountable barrier has come down. And he's glad.

This is a remarkable story. It's the first of many such stories in Acts. Their cozy little gathering of believers is about to get bigger. God will break down lots of barriers and make room for people they never would have imagined. A eunuch from Ethiopia - who is a castrated, black male - comes to believe in Jesus and asks to get baptized. Paul - a fierce persecutor of Christians - has a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he falls to his knees in repentance and becomes one of those Christians. A woman named Tabitha - who's devoted to doing good deeds, becomes ill and dies; but Peter raises her up, and she and lots of her friends continue to serve in significant ways. Cornelius - a Roman centurion and a Gentile - has a vision in which the God of Israel shows no partiality, but instead makes room for people like him.

Indeed, they're not a cozy little church anymore. In setting after setting, the name of Jesus is lifted up. Notice where the healing of the lame man takes place. It's not within the temple, but just outside of it. That's significant. God is on the move. Luke, the author of Acts, is making a strong political and religious point: God is no longer confined within an institution, but rather is breaking out into new worlds, leaving behind the shrine which had become a place of worldly power and resistance to God's purposes.





I'd like to think that in each of Zumbro's three downtown locations, parishioners have been guided by the conviction that the God we worship is a God on the move. Over the years, our country has needed healing after the Civil War. Zumbro has needed to transition from Norwegian-services to English. Women have needed the right to vote. Barriers have been coming down. God has been on the move, not confined to any particular building, but always breaking into new worlds.

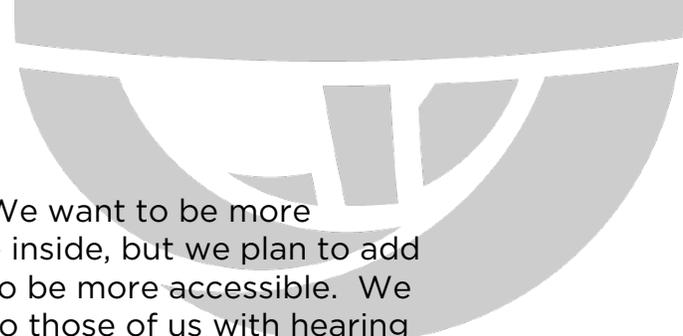
Back in 1969, it might have felt like a stretch to some people to move into a new facility designed in a contemporary architectural style. It was called Brutalism, though that term wasn't used much, if at all, by the designer. The main feature was raw, unfinished concrete. It was meant to be unpretentious and humble, to connect worshippers to the earth and to the God who created it. The new sanctuary was a lot different from the old one. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall as they presented the designs to the congregation. There had to be detractors. But somehow, by the grace of God, the congregation banded together and the move happened. They entered a sanctuary centered on the theme of reconciliation. At the heart of that reconciliation were God's efforts to keep breaking down barriers and heal the broken.

Six years ago, when we worked to discern a new mission statement for Zumbro, we lifted up the importance of reconciliation but eventually we went with *building bridges of understanding and peace*. They're not so far apart. God is still about the work of reconciliation at Zumbro, and our mission compels us to join God in the work of dismantling barriers and healing the broken.

As we head into the Our Church, Our Future campaign, the reasons for doing this were identified by the congregation in listening posts last winter. There are three main reasons: enhancing worship, extending hospitality, and expanding mission. We'll be talking about these at length during the month of October. You can read more about them in *The Way Look from Here*. As in 1969, we probably won't agree about all the plans. But we believe in a God who is on the move. Keep in mind, this campaign is not just about us, but about our platform for mission, and about those who are not yet here. Fundraiser Henri Nowen challenges us: "We have a vision that is amazing and exciting. We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources God has given you - your energy, your prayers, and your money - in this work to which God has called us."



I'm proud of our church. We build bridges of understanding and peace. We make lefse and remember our roots. But we also make burritos and reach out to a wide variety of people. The hope of breaking down barriers is



how this project got started in the first place. We want to be more accessible. We have a long ramp to get people inside, but we plan to add an elevator to make it much easier. We want to be more accessible. We plan to put a hearing looping in the sanctuary so those of us with hearing devices can hear better. We want to be more accessible. In a sanctuary in which it's often difficult to see what's going on up front, we're going to raise up the chancel, and put some events up on the screen, so everyone can be more engaged in worship.

No matter where we go these days, there are barriers that need to come down. Perhaps you saw 12-year-old Amari Allen in the news this past week. Amari had a traumatic incident on the playground at Immanuel Christian School where she attends. We're still waiting for her story to be verified, but it sounds all too familiar. When Amari finally got up the courage to tell her mom, she shared that three white boys pushed her to the ground. They were laughing and calling her ugly, and saying she should never have been born. Then they grabbed a pair scissors and cut off a portion of her dreadlocks.

We live in a great big world. There are lots of barriers, many of them designed to keep people out, many of them seemingly insurmountable. Our passage from Acts calls us to reach out to the stranger with healing and hope. In the name of esus, we offer healing to those with mobility needs. In the name of esus, we offer healing to refugees and those of different socio-economic status. In the name of esus, we offer healing to people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In the name of esus, we offer healing to people of different political persuasions and those of various sexual orientations. The list could go on and on. There are so many barriers in our world. The healing will need to be different in each situation. But in each situation we'll want to say: There's room for you with us! We will walk with you!

Much like those early believers in Acts, God calls us to venture out from our cozy little church and to be engaged in mission with a God who's on the move, who's not confined to any building, who's always breaking into new worlds. Do we always know where we're going? No. But if we're willing to look hard at the needs in front of us, there will be more than a few opportunities for deep human connection and the deep work of God. Amen.

