

The decision that I would be preaching at the beginning of this year was made almost a year ago. The decision that I would be preaching today almost six months ago.

So, I had a lot of time to think about this day and what I would be saying to you, which is good, since it is my first sermon after all.

I can assure you, this wasn't easy.

As for every sermon, the first thing that had to be done was of course choosing a text.

I thought 'I'll just use whatever text is scheduled for today and preach about the thoughts I'd have while reading it.' I probably should have known that it wouldn't be that easy.

The text that I read was, though interesting, not for me. It was a lot about politics, social issues and conflicts between several countries and tribes.

I am not a theologian.

Everything I know about theology I know from visiting church, from visiting confirmation class or from sitting at the dinner table with my parents. In short: I didn't get any of what the text said.

So, there I was facing two problems: No text and hardly any training in theology.

I decided to tackle the theology problem first.

I am no theologian and that certainly wouldn't change within half a year.

So I decided to change my perspective.

I stopped thinking about what I am not – a theologian - and started thinking about what I am.

I am a psychologist.

So why not make use of those skills?

I'm not telling you this to brag about my degree, but because it had a huge impact on my approach on the text.

So, after sorting out one problem, sorting out the other suddenly became much easier.

This text from Acts chapter 3 that we just read had somehow always intrigued me, so I decided to take it.

Now I had a text and an approach and I started working.

Some of you probably already made a connection - thinking that of course the disabled man chooses to preach on a text about the healing of a disabled man. But I have to disappoint you, because that is not what I had in mind.

In fact, I didn't even make that connection myself until someone pointed it out to me.

There are several healing stories in the Bible: The healing of blind people, the healing of sick people, of disabled people, even of dead people and a lot can be said about them.

What I want to talk about today and why I picked this particular story is not the fact that or how the healing happened. I'm going to focus on what happened right before the healing. Because by thinking about this, it actually turned out to be a very important lesson for me, both personally and professionally.

Personally, I find it hard to believe in the miraculous healing of sick or disabled people.

But I still enjoy the stories, because I usually see the sicknesses and disabilities in these stories much more as symbols rather than actual physical disabilities.

The blind person might be someone who either refuses or hasn't learned yet to see things in a specific way.

Or the sick person could be someone who forgot to take care of him or herself.

In the same way the disability of that man in front of the temple, as a physical inability to move might just as well be seen as a mental inability to move.
And here's where my being a psychologist comes into play.
Because in modern terms this mental inability to move would be considered depression.

Depression is a state of mind, generally characterized by alternating episodes of either deep sadness, or a complete lack of emotions at all.

What causes depression and how exactly it develops depends entirely on the individual. But it can be broken down to some symptoms that typically come up. While the emotional problems are definitely the most apparent, people with depression have other problems to deal with as well.

They often describe a sensation of meaninglessness or not being good enough.

Because of that, they often feel as if they don't belong anywhere, not to their group of friends, not to society, or sometimes not even to the world they live in.

'As if you were watching the rest of the world through a thick glass window, all distant and dull' - this is how someone once explained this to me.

And here we have our lame beggar in front of the temple, lying there, watching.

Watching the rest of the world live their lives, not being able to participate.

But what exactly about this makes him unable to move?

One of the biggest issues while treating depression is, that the patients often have a hard time getting on their feet.

They just don't have the strength to take action anymore.

They won't make plans and sometimes not even leave their homes anymore.

The worse the depression, the worse this gets, which makes it so hard for them to solve their problems.

This inability to help themselves then leads to a tendency to receive.

An observation often made with people with depression is, that they demand a lot of support. That alone is not a problem, everyone needs help here and there.

What becomes a problem in this particular case is, that the help is always of a very short term nature and doesn't solve anything on the long run. It may help them for now, but it doesn't solve the overall problem.

To be clear, the patient is not to be blamed, because as I just explained, they can't take action to change things anymore.

But to friends and relatives trying to help someone with depression can become rather frustrating for exactly that reason. While they keep on helping, investing their time and energy, it can often feel as if their support doesn't lead anywhere, not necessarily because it is not appreciated, but because it is not the kind of support the person needs.

This often results in the helper slowly burning out and finally giving up.

Back to our lame beggar:

In my opinion, he shows exactly what I have just described.

While he isn't able to move on his own, he still has people helping him solve his short term problems. Someone carries him to the temple in the morning and someone carries him home in the evening. In the time in between he is able to beg for money.

So far, this has worked out.
But if things stay like that, nothing is ever going to change.

When John and Peter walk past him, he does what he always does and asks them for alms, as he would ask anyone else. They however refuse and instead give him something else.

„And he took him by the right hand and raised him up;“

This right hand felt oddly prominent to me.
He didn't just tap his shoulder to heal him. Nor did he just take any hand to raise him up or throw dirt in his face. He took his right hand.
So, there has to be some meaning to this right hand, right?

After a bit of research, I found out, that the right hand is actually a very strong symbol.
In Christian culture, the right hand is generally associated with God or the power of God, so it makes sense that Peter uses the right hand to perform a miracle.

But there is something else to this right hand that felt even more important to me:
In the majority of cultures, the right hand is the one you would use to interact with others, mostly in a positive manner.
Offer to be someone's right hand - you offer your trust and support.
Put your right hand close to your heart - you make a promise.
Raise your right fist - you make a political statement.
Reaching out to someone with your right hand can be a greeting, an offer or a sign of agreement.

And that is why I think that this right hand is so important for this story.
When I read it, I pictured Peter as if he was waiting for the beggar to react.
He offered him his right hand, -
waiting for him to decide –
whether he wants to grab it –
or not.

Psychologists widely agree that when treating depression, material and short-term support has little to no effect. And even if it has some effect, it doesn't last long.
Forcing help on someone is even worse, with an even weaker effect and, in some cases, a negative effect, making the depression even more serious.

The key to successfully treating depression is helping the patient to gather the strength and will to find his own solution.
But that means, that the patient needs to accept the treatment and to be willing to actually change things. If that is not the case, there's really not much you can do.

I think Peter knew that.
And I think that is why he waited and didn't just heal the man.
He probably could have, but he didn't.
He knew, that simply healing the man, because he would think that it's the right thing to do, might not have been what that man wanted or needed.

Maybe he was happy with his lifestyle, there was no way Peter could have known without asking.

And as I said, forcing help on him could have made things even worse.

So, Peter reached out with his right hand and waited, basically telling the man:

'I can help - if you want me to - if you help me to do so.'

This way, the beggar still could have refused. Only when he accepted and grabbed this right hand, Peter raised him up.

The beggar then jumped up, he stood and walked and leapt and praised.

And the people in the temple were full of surprise seeing him like that, with all his new found energy and joy.

Again, this is something that correlates with post-depressive people.

Once having dealt with the major problems leading to their depression, their friends often describe the patient as much happier and more energetic than before, - almost like a new person, full of ideas and plans.

This man who 'used to sit and ask', as the text says, who used to receive, now doesn't anymore. He now has the will and the energy to help himself and to organize and live his life the way he wishes it to be.

This is where a therapy should lead to.

To the patient not being a patient anymore.

And in the story, as soon as he knew he accepted it: Peter gave him the help he needed, and now he will not need him or the others again.

There's one more thing to say about Peter offering help and not simply providing it.

Because I think he didn't only wait for the beggar's sake, but also to protect himself.

Protect himself from needless disappointment, by realizing that his help wasn't even wanted, protect himself from what so many others had to experience trying to help.

And here's what we can learn from this text:

Both as Christians and as members of a society God wants us to help and support others.

But as I just explained, that is not always as easy as it may seem.

Helping, as rewarding as it may be, can be tiring, exhausting, frustrating, especially if it feels as if our help doesn't actually help.

We all have our limits and it is most important for us to know them, because as we are responsible for those around us, we are just as responsible for ourselves.

Secondly, I think, that we are always supposed to try and help those around us, at the same time I think that all we can do is offer our help, let people know that we are there if needed. I'm not saying that we should just sit there and wait until someone asks for help; that would be way too easy.

But I do think, that we have the right and the responsibility to think about ourselves as well.

If someone, even if very close to us, doesn't want, accept, or appreciate our help and support, there is no reason to feel bad about actually stopping it.

So, should we help others?

Yes!

Should we be patient and sometimes even a bit persuasive?

Absolutely!

But should we destroy ourselves in the process?

Absolutely not!

To finish this sermon, I would like to finish it with four words.

Four words for every one of you who offers someone a right hand in support, and for everyone who is at the same time caring for his or her own wellbeing:

Thank you very much!

Amen.