

**Laggan and Newtonmore
Parish Church of Scotland**

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What to do with someone in need

Matthew 9:27-10:10

Acts 3:1-16

In following the friends of Jesus as they worked out how to live as disciples after he had left them, we have seen them learn what to do when you don't know what to do – to wait and pray and do what comes to hand. We have seen them learn what to do when the time to do something comes – which is tell people the great things that God has done, for all and for you. Today we see them learn something of what to do when you meet people in need.

Peter and John were going to the temple to pray. They had, since the day of Pentecost, come out of hiding and were going about freely in Jerusalem again. And as good Jews, when they wanted to pray their preferred place to do so was in the temple. They were in a good place in their lives just then. The preaching on Pentecost and since had yielded many followers – who was it what had said that the fields were ripe unto harvest? The new Jesus movement was living in a communal lifestyle, supporting each other so that all had enough. And they were enjoying the goodwill of their neighbours. So Peter and John went freely to the temple to give thank and pray.

And at the gate they were accosted by a lame beggar. He approached them, he called out to them. Sometimes we can be aware of so much need in the world that we don't know how to help, where to give our support, how to begin. If we follow Jesus, maybe we should think about how he decided who to help: and time and again in the gospels we see that he waits until he is asked. As we read, he waits for the blind man to cry out to him, He waits for the mute man to be brought to him, just as he waits for the four friends to lower the paralysed man, he waits for the ten lepers to approach him – and so on. I find it hard to think of any example where we see Jesus

setting out to see if he could find someone to help. The fields are white unto harvest. You don't need to search, the need comes to you.

Jesus waits till he is asked, and Jesus' example is one which his friends seem to be following – they waited until they were asked.

What they are asked for is not healing – who could think that that would be a possibility? They were asked for alms, for money. These two men, who had lately been living in hiding, who had for three years lived in a communal, hand-to-mouth way, who were now living in a community which shared out everything so that no one had too little or too much, were asked for money. When they thought about it, they might well have wanted to laugh. They didn't have money. In fact, in worldly terms, they might be said to be in need themselves.

Most of us at some time know what it is to be in need: to be short of money, not just for luxuries but for essentials. Or to be short of friends and lonely. Or to be short of confidence and isolated. Or to be short of purpose and listless. Or to be short of health and sick. Most of us know what it is to be in need, for longer or shorter times. But your own need does not mean that you may not help with someone else's. You can't give what you haven't got of course, but you can give what you do have. Like Peter and John.

They had no money, but they had faith and they had love. First of all Peter asks the man to look at them. If you walk the streets of our cities, even Inverness, but especially Edinburgh and Glasgow, you will meet people who are begging. And what they nearly all have in common is that they do not look up but look down. Maybe it is in an attempt to look humble, but more likely it is because it is too hard to see the faces of those who pass by and ignore them. They look down. As did this beggar.

Peter begins his giving of help by asking him to look up. As he did so, he would see that Peter and John would not be dressed in any rich clothing, such as some of those who came to the temple. It would be obvious that they were working men. No they didn't have silver or gold – at all, never mind to spare. But then Peter gives what he has, he gives the faith in Jesus that has in these past days grown strong in him. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk."

Peter has given what he has, but the man has to receive it. What Peter is offering him is the kind of help which will change the man's life. If he does what he is asked and manages to stand and walk, no one will take him seriously as a beggar again. He will need to look for work. His life will change. Does he really want this? Peter doesn't know. He only knows that

he was asked for help and this is the help that he has. It is up to the beggar now.

And, as we know, this beggar was one who wanted his life to change. He didn't want to stay in his familiar subservience. He wanted health and all the responsibilities that would come with that blessing. So he tried to do what Peter said and found that he could. And so amazed was he that he went walking and even leaping and praising God. What a sight it must have been! And Peter takes the opportunity to make sure that the amazement of the crowd is not directed to himself or John but where it should be, to Jesus and what God has done and still does through him.

What to do when you meet someone in need? Wait to be asked. It is by trying to do people good which they don't want done to them that Christian people have sometimes been accused of being interfering do-gooders. Not everyone wants your help, even if you think that they could do with it! I have known people, even in this church, who have worried themselves into fits about some people or situations about which they can do nothing, forgetting that they haven't been asked to get involved.

But when you are asked, when someone says "What do you think?" or "Can you help me?" or in some other way invites you into their situation, then don't try to do what you can't but ask God what you can do. Remember the David and Goliath story when David agreed to try the king's armour and found he couldn't even walk. We need to learn to think, not in the way of the world, doing what seems expected, but in the ways of God – who helps us give what we have and makes a solution.

There are people in need all over the world. We may give money to help those far away, but to those near at hand, those we live among, those who ask for our help, we can give more than a hand-out, we can give ourselves, our attention and we can give what we have, which was freely given to us.

When Jesus talked about the fields being white and ready for harvesting, he mentioned the paucity of workers. He told his disciples to pray for workers to be sent and then he sent them himself. He sent them to go to their own people and do his work. He told them not to do it in the world's way – which is to tackle every problem with the idea of how much it will cost in terms of silver and gold, of pounds and pence – but to go reliant on God. He knew that they would find people who asked for their help and that when they were asked, they would find that there were things that they could offer, because they were looking through his eyes and learning to think in his ways. Because he had taught fishermen to be fishers of men, using their skills and the wisdom and power and love of God.

Not all of us can give silver and gold – some can of course, and sometimes that is what is needed to change and help a situation. But sometimes the need is greater than can be solved with money, even if money is what is asked for. Sometimes a person needs love more than anything. They need to be told to look up, to look out from their problem, to stop seeing themselves as a problem.

Some people have the gift of healing – probably more people than we know of, or even than they know of, because we are so reluctant to try and see what in Jesus's name and in God's power can be done. Some have the gift of healing bodies and others the gift of healing lives and situations. And it can be personally costly to exercise such gifts, it can take time and patience and ignoring rebuffs or rudeness. It takes real love. Such love is at the root of all that Jesus did and how he did it. Love is the calling that all of his disciples have, the willingness to take others to heart and care and act. Love is at the root of all real healing, which is different from and more than the removal of disease; and there is no true healing without it – the love of God, which is very often mediated by the loving kindness of Christ's disciples.

We received without payment, as Jesus said. No one charged you to be loved into God's family. Whether it was your human family who brought you there, or the love of a friend or neighbour, or whether you found yourself entering God's family through a personal quest, there was no charge for God's grace (which is underserved love) being given you. And so we are called to live with that same generosity at the heart of our lives, and when we are asked, to give what we have, which will always begin with the love of God.