

How many of you remember an ad from years ago that could be found in many magazines which read: "They laughed when I sat down to play." The ad was touting a tutorial for learning to play the piano. It played, if you will pardon the pun, on peoples' hopes not only to play a musical instrument but their secret desire to astonish friends and family members who had not believed them capable of such skill. The ad had played for so long that it became a joke but the punchline is at the heart of our reading from Acts and runs through all of our readings for this week, the point being that in God all things are possible and God's deepest desire for us all is to open ourselves to the transformation offered to us through life in Christ.

What greater advertisement for the transforming power of Christ can there be but Peter? Peter, who throughout Jesus' ministry had been an avid disciple, who had nonetheless shown his faith to be a bit shaky when it came to walking on water or understanding what Jesus meant about the path self-sacrifice, and who, despite his promise to Jesus to be faithful unto death had not only denied Jesus three times but had run away when Jesus was actually crucified.

Peter has emerged as a leader. Just before our passage begins Peter had healed a man who had been lame from birth. The man had stopped Peter to ask for alms, money that Peter had none to give but instead he offered the man something better – a way to be restored to fullness of life. Peter healed his feet which meant that the man was now able to earn a living and to rejoin society instead of being left to beg at the gate of the temple.

The message here is twofold. Peter is a stand in for all of us. All we have to do is look at today's gospel to realize that none of the disciples were able to grasp what had happened. They could not grasp a reality that transcended anything they had ever expected. Jesus, whom they had seen die, Jesus had come back from the dead – and the news, the very sight of him was overwhelming, news that was too good to be true. "They were startled and terrified, and...disbelieving." They were no better than Peter – as we are no better than Peter. But Peter is an example for us; Peter is an example because he followed his heart, he persisted even when he knew that he had failed. Have you ever betrayed someone or let someone down?

Have you ever violated a principle that you held to be sacrosanct?

When we are honest with ourselves it's a really hard thing to live with.

Well, so did Peter. And the person that he failed was someone who offered him everything and yet Peter did not have enough faith to give himself over to what Jesus was offering. Granted it wasn't all rainbows and unicorns. Life in Christ is meant to be countercultural. It is meant to make us critics of the status quo, it is meant to make us uncomfortable when we go about the business of restoring all people to God and each other in Christ. Peacemakers are usually the first ones to be killed, maybe not in body but through ridicule and rejection. Preaching forgiveness goes against our natural desire for retributive justice, our need to see evil-doers punished, our need for revenge. Jesus does not offer us the easy way out but Jesus is there with us. And Jesus offers us forgiveness when we fail and gives us plenty of opportunities to try again. You know the old adage – never ask God for patience because God will surely respond with many opportunities that try our patience. Certainly living, working or worshipping with people gives more than adequate proof of that!

Peter was forgiven. That Peter was forgiven can encourage us even when we fail, even when we are not our best selves, even when we doubt that what Jesus has told us is true, even when we are angry with God, even when we have no hope.

Peter was forgiven and became the first among the apostles. As he sets out on his missionary journey he is rewarded with access to God's power of healing. This was the man who could not get out of his own way, a man who misunderstood Jesus and his mission but whose life is now transformed. He is willing to address crowds, able to demonstrate God's healing power and to take the unpopular stance of calling for repentance. In the end he will bring Jesus' message to Rome to the very seat of the empire and there he will be martyred, overcoming the fear that held him back in the first place. Not only was Peter forgiven but the other disciples were also forgiven. Jesus speaks to them all. He takes the time to reassure them to show them that his own transformation has not made him a ghost, but their resurrected Lord who was willing to open their minds to scripture, so that they might understand what had been prophesied about the messiah and to commission them to go out and proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to all the nations. This was not a task for those who had not opened themselves to God's healing grace.

Peter's transformation was not a one off!

As for the man who was healed, his life too is transformed, not only is he able to walk but he has been given the gift of gratitude. Touched by God's grace he enters the temple, leaping for joy and praising God. Isn't that what we all want, to be open and ready to express our gratitude for all that God has done and will do in our lives, to it down at that piano and astonish our friends and families with who we have become?

But that is not all, most of us are not Peter, many of us may never be completely healed from what holds us back – this is not negative this is the reality of the pervasive presence of sin in our lives and the loss and wounds that sometimes go too deep for healing in this lifetime but there is still hope, hope that we hear in our reading from 1 John. It reminds us that none of us can know the full extent to which our lives can be transformed when we open ourselves to God. Furthermore the first part of this passage is one of the lectionary suggestions for funerals. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are....Beloved we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed." It's offered at funerals because it reminds us that we expect further transformation even after death until in the resurrection we are purified in God's light and can stand before God as the perfected form of who God intended us to be because we are beloved children of God.

And no, we don't know what this will mean; "what we will be has not yet been revealed" but we can trust that what God has intended for us, for each and every one of us will bring restoration and fullness of joy. Now that's a powerful vision. It's a powerful vision of the transformative power offered us in Jesus Christ not only in this life but in the next and all because Jesus was willing to live, die and rise again for us.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!