

## **Different To Make A Difference**

Care Sacrificially – Part 1

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### **CARE SACRIFICIALLY – PART 1** **Acts 3:1-26**

If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, please open with me to Acts 3. I want us to see that over the next two weeks. Last couple of weeks, last few weeks we've talked about the Word and the centrality of the Word and worship and we've talked about how the New Testament Church was known because it spoke the Word of God boldly. I want us to take a step deeper and look at how the New Testament Church was known for how it cared for each other, sacrificially. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the what? The fellowship, the community.

And what we're going to do this week is we're going to look at an illustration of that in Acts 3 that comes right on the heel of the passage we've been studying and then next week we're going to dive into Acts 2:42-47 as well as Acts 4:32-37, which are on either side of the story we're going to look at today to dive deeper into exactly what community is about.

So I want us to start on Acts 3, you follow along there and I want you to see this picture that Luke gives us coming right off of the summation of the early church. It says in Acts 3:1,

*One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!' So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.*

*Then Peter said, 'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him (Acts 3:1-10).*

**What made the early church different?**  
**They were concerned about the hurts of people around them.**

Right here in Acts 3, Luke is giving us a picture through Peter and John of what biblical community is all about and we're going to look at what made the early church different. And

I want you to see three characteristics this morning that come out in this picture and we're going to see how those play out, even in our faith family at The Church at Brook Hills.

Number one, what made the early church different? These were people that were concerned about the hurts of those around them. They were concerned about the hurts of people around them. This is one of the things that set them apart. And I want you to see how that develops here in Acts 3. It's a pretty, pretty simple progression. Peter and John walking to the temple. That was one of the places they would gather together as a New Testament Church. And as they were walking toward the temple they've got this guy who's sitting there, who's been crippled from birth. We don't know exactly how old he is, but we know there's never been a time where this guy was not lame, this guy was not set apart in society, this guy was not one of the neediest in that culture, crippled from birth.

And many people would often attribute that to sin in his life or his family's life. This guy earned that or deserved that. And so he would have people that would carry him to the gates there at the temple and he would have somebody sit him down there. And people were required to give alms, that was seen as a good thing to do, a noble act, and so people would come by and toss him some change every once and a while.

### **The overall progression ...**

So Peter and John come upon this guy. Undoubtedly, they've probably seen him before. But I want you to see the progression. Number one, first of all, we see the hurt of people around us. That's where it started. Peter and John noticed this guy. Now, certainly there were others who noticed him, but undoubtedly on that as well as every day, there were people who walked by this guy and never paid a bit of attention to him, just completely ignored him. Same things we often do when we see the needs around us. It's real easy sometimes to turn a deaf ear to those things, particularly in needy situations like this.

In the time I spent in India and the poverty that is so rampant in India, more people in India living below the poverty line than there are in the United States, altogether. And you get the point where you almost become a little numb to it. You see kids sitting on the side of the streets, everywhere. You see people starving, everywhere. And it's just becomes so overwhelming.

So first of all, Peter and John saw this guy, we see the hurt. Second, though the progression goes to feeling the hurt. Second, we feel the hurt. When the Bible says in verse 4, "*Peter looked straight at him*" (Acts 3:4), that's a word that Luke uses a couple different times and just to give you a picture of how intentional Luke is using this word. The first time we saw it was in the Acts 1:10-11 when Jesus ascended into heaven and the disciples looked up into heaven. It's this look of intent, it's an amazement, it's a very fixed gaze on something. That's how Luke pictures that in Acts 1:10-11.

And then we see him use the same word in the New Testament in Acts 7, when Stephen is about to be stoned. It says he, "*Looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God*" (Acts 7:55). And Luke's being real intentional to show us not just Peter and John glancing at this guy as they move on, but looking straight at him and it's more of an emotional involvement that we see happening here as Peter and John fix their eyes on this guy.

So we see the hurt and we feel the hurt and then, finally, we touch the hurt. This guy says, "What are you going to give me? Do you have any money?" Peter and John say, "*Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk*" (Acts 3:6). And Peter reaches down and touches this guy that is despised,

touches this guy that is left out of every bit of culture and society around him. Peter and John reach down and touch this guy, helped him up and this guy begins to walk. The progression – we see the hurt, we feel the hurt and we touch the hurt.

I want us to begin to think this morning, about how that looks in each of our lives. Because in our age of technology and information and all the things we have it is very easy for us to even be exposed to the need, to see needs around us. We can flip on Fox News day in and day out and see the tragedies that are going on in our country, as well as around the world. But what does it mean when a people begin to not just see those needs, as they browse over the Internet or watch Fox News, but to begin to feel the weight of those needs and then to take some steps to meet those needs? Because we live in a culture, today, where we can put our iPods in our ears and we can watch TV and we can do all the things that we do in our busyness in our lives and never lift a finger to meaningfully engage the needs of those people around us. And not just in culture as a whole, but in the church.

With all of the people in this room I want you to think about the breadth of struggles that are represented here today. Doubtless there are many people who come in here today with physical struggles, many who come in with some things going on emotionally. There are numerous family issues represented in here, some difficulties that are going on; divorce about to take place or the effects of divorce being felt. All kinds of different emotional issues, spiritual issues. We come in here with all kinds of different spiritual levels, some of us walking intimately with God, some of us cold as we can be toward God. All kinds of needs around here.

And what I want us to remember is it's very easy, particularly in our church culture, to come in to church, Sunday in and Sunday out, and never meaningfully engage the needs of those around us and we've become this inauthentic gathering of people, if that's the case. What does a people look like that sees each other's needs, feels each other's needs and begins to reach out and touch each other's needs?

Now, I want you to see something so incredible in this passage in light of the context. What we see in chapter 2, just to back up a little bit, verse 41, we talked about this already, those who accepted the message that Peter preached were baptized, and how many people were added to their number that day? Three thousand. So 3,000 people get saved. That's a pretty good church growth stat right there, okay? Things are going well in the early church. Three thousand people, from 120 in Acts 1, to 3,000 at the end of Acts 2. That was a good day in the church.

If we had – if you just do it ratio-wise percentage-wise, if we had a day like that, next Sunday we'd have 100,000 people here at worship, all right? We would need more than a third service. Okay? It wouldn't cut it. An amazing picture of growth here.

I want you to look at Acts 4. Look at Acts 4:4. This is after Peter and John preached, which we're going to get to in a minute, look at verse 4. Peter and John are in jail, it says, "*But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand*" (Acts 4:4). So you got a couple more thousand that came on after this happened. We've got some massive growth going on here. The church is expanding at breathtaking speeds.

### **The overall truth ...**

Then right here in the middle, Luke gives us a picture of Peter and John reaching out to the sky that nobody else really cared that much about and I want you to see a truth the New Testament Church knew that we've got to get a hold on today. Those who are most

effective in reaching the many are those who are most passionate about reaching the one. Do you see that? Those who are most effective at reaching the masses are those who are most passionate about reaching the one.

This was the mark of the New Testament Church. Yes, they were growing at breathtaking speeds but it was because they cared about individuals, they cared about people and they reached out and they saw the hurts around them, they felt the way to those hurts just as Jesus did when He saw the crowds, He had what on them? He had compassion on them and He began to heal their diseases. They began to touch the needs. They're following the pattern of Jesus and living it out in individual's lives there in Jerusalem.

This was the mark of the early Church. The most popular form of birth control during that day was infanticide. They didn't do abortion. They would have the child and then they would throw the child away. They would kill the child if they didn't want it. There's a note I came across from early church time – it said this, "I beg and entreat you. Take care of the little one. As soon as we receive our pay I will send it up to you. If, by chance," this is a picture of culture in that day, "if by chance you bear a child, if it is a boy, let it be. If it is a girl, expose it."

And Christians in the first century were known to go behind into those trash heaps and pick up those babies that nobody else wanted. Those who are most effective in reaching the many were those who were most passionate about reaching the one.

When there was a plague in Rome and all of the people left the city to avoid getting burnt by the plague, there was Christians that were known to stay behind and care for the people that everybody else had left to care for themselves. That was the mark of the New Testament Church. What happened though? A brief survey of church history, and this is overly simplistic, but it gives us a picture.

About 250 A.D., Cyprian of Carthage begins to talk about how we need to separate laity from clergy. And you've got ministers who do the serving and then you've got just the average person in the church. And so there began to be a separation, a hierarchy of ministry. In 313, Constantine legalizes Christianity and what he does is he begins to build buildings for people to gather in, places for the clergy to work.

It wasn't too long before you see monasticism creep in, it's not only places for the clergy and the ministers to work, now you've got places for the ministers to live separate from the people around them.

You see that church history progresses even more. You come to the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries you begin to see the development of the industrial revolution and the church is a business that is run by the clergy. And you can interact with ministers and you can interact with servants if you go to a church, if you go to a building, but don't expect them to come to you. And somewhere along the way the purity of the care and concern of the early church completely faded away and we've got to recapture what it means to be the church and what it means to be concerned, deeply concerned about the hurts that are represented in this room, as well as the hurts that are represented outside of this room.

Those who are most effective in reaching the many will be those who are most passionate about reaching the one.

So here's what I'd like us to do. This morning I want us to take a glimpse behind the curtain of one member of our Faith Family who has had hurt and struggle, recently, in her life.

Rashel Ross is going to allow us, this morning, to come in a little bit on a glimpse into her journals and her walk with Christ over the last couple of years. And I want you to see a picture of the struggle and the hurt that is, undoubtedly, is represented here. Let's come in on a glimpse of her hurt and the struggles she began to experience.

*Rashel Ross*

It was nine years ago that you came into my life. What a journey it's been. With each day I love you more. I have struggled and you have kept me going. I have fallen and your grace lifted me up. When I see me in my past I am very sad. But when I see you in me I'm excited and hopeful for my future. My future in you. I desire to be an encouragement and hope-giver to people around me.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer today. I have cancer. I have cancer. It feels like an out of body experience, one that I never fully imagined taking. My thoughts are relatively clear. This is where everything I believe God to be is ironed out and I have the privilege of becoming more intimate with my creator. I'm sure over the next months to come I will experience many emotions. I'm going to be okay with that and just allow myself to feel. My prayer is that God will use this to reach others and that those who see me will know it is the hand of God alone that sustains me.

So here we go, Lord. You and me on a journey of the unknown. I have no idea what will come but I can imagine I will experience love and joy in a capacity that few ever get to experience. I'm ready to fight this. I'm ready to walk this journey and I'm ready to embrace what you have for me.

I'm, honestly, not sure what is harder, not knowing what to expect or now knowing and facing it seven more times. I went in last Wednesday and, of course, I had no experience to draw from. I can, laughingly, look back at what the doctors and nurses and other chemo patients must have thought as I be-bopped in there, all smiles carrying brownies for the nurses and doctors. Can't you just read the minds of the other chemo patients who were thinking something like, "Look at the new girl. You can tell this is her first time."

About halfway through the treatment my smile was wiped off my face. I didn't realize that the treatment takes as long as it does. I was in the chair for about three hours. The first part of the chemo didn't bother me too bad. Then the nurse said I had a remaining 45 minutes and they were connecting the last bag and I would feel it in my sinuses. "Okay," I thought. "I understand."

Immediately I began to taste an overwhelming metal taste that led to a sensation, somewhat like I had inhaled pepper in my nose but couldn't sneeze to relieve it. I felt it in my head, my nose burned, my throat burned and then the tears gave way. It's almost humorous, now. I'm sitting there talking, because we all know I enjoy that, asking about the doctor's families, trying to get to know some of the nurses and then all of a sudden I closed my eyes and I was dead silent.

Nurse Nell came to me and said, "Rashel, honey, are you okay?" The tears spoke for themselves and what struck me is Nurse Nell does this every day and yet she connected with me in those moments of discomfort and her eyes filled with tears.

By Thursday afternoon and into Friday, I couldn't tell what part of my body hurt worse. I had developed blisters in my esophagus and throat which made swallowing and eating an even greater chore. My sternum felt intense pressure, my head hurt and I had someone with me around the clock and we just did what it took to get through the hours.

What is a miracle? Is it only if God chooses to save me from death? Is it only if this cancer mysteriously disappears? I think birth is a miracle and that takes place every day, all across the world. Many people believe I will be healed but that means different things to different people.

Here's what I believe. I believe you're an enormous, loving God who will carry me through this. I don't believe that you gave me this cancer but I do believe you have allowed it to pass through your hands. I believe that you are a God of miracles, no matter what that might look like. Would I like you to take this cancer away? You bet. Am I afraid that asking for a miraculous miracle will turn out to be rejected? Yes.

That completely goes against your character. You will never reject me. You love me. I feel it and I know it. If I doubt anything, it is not your awesome power and strength and ability to heal and work miracles. What I doubt is that you will do it for me. I think that is less about you and more about me. I'm certain it grieves your heart that I have trust issues with even my creator. I have wounds that are deep that only you can heal.

*David Platt*

You feel the weight of the need and the hurt and it's deeper than just a physical hurt. It's an emotional hurt and it's a spiritual hurt. And when we go through struggles in each of our lives we begin to ask questions about who God is. We begin to ask questions about how He works and how we trust Him and we hit on some of the deepest issues that we ever face. The Scripture is teaching us that we were not intended to face those alone. The early church was different because they were deeply concerned about the hurts of those around them.

## **They were confident in the name of the One who saved them.**

The second characteristic I want you to see as we come into the end of Acts 3 and even into Acts 4, not only were they concerned about the hurts of those around them, but they were confident in the name of the one who had saved them. They were confident in the name of the one who saved them. It really starts to get good as we think about this.

In this story that we've read, Acts 3:1 through 10, who do you think the hero is in this story? Is it the beggar, this lame man who, some people say, had enough faith to be healed but a lot of people say showed no evidence of faith in here, whatsoever? Was he the hero as he stands up, begins to jump and shout out and scream? Maybe he was the hero.

Maybe Peter was the hero. Pretty bold move, walk up to a guy who hasn't walked his entire life and say, "Get up and walk." That's a pretty big faith step to take. Maybe Peter was the hero. Maybe even John, best actor in a supporting role. I don't know, however you think John fits in to this role. Who's the hero, the beggar, Peter, John?

I don't think any of those are the hero of this story. The hero of this story is the name of Jesus Christ. Peter says to this guy, "*Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk*" (Acts 3:6).

Now, I want you to see how huge this is in this story in Acts 3 and Acts 4. Let me show you how many times Luke emphasizes that Peter was talking about the name and Peter was relying on the name of Christ. The name of Christ was the hero.

Look at Acts 3:16. Circle every time in Acts 3 and Acts 4 you see the word “name”, referring to the name of Christ. Look at Acts 3:16, *“By faith in the name of Jesus,”* there it is, *“this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name”*—here it is again—*“and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see”* (Acts 3:16).

Then you get over to Acts 4. Peter and John begin to preach in the Sanhedrin, to the people there. It says in verse 7, *“They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: ‘By what power or what name did you do this’”* (Acts 4:7)? Look at verse 10, *“Know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed”* (Acts 4:10).

Two verses later, Acts 4:12, *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”* Look at verse 17, *“To stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name”* (Acts 4:17). The very next verse, 18, *“Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus”* (Acts 4:18).

And then you come over to Acts 4:30, Peter and John are now praying with the believers in light of the persecution they are beginning to experience. Listen to what they say in verse 30. *“Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus”* (Acts 4:30).

Do you get the point? Over and over and over again, Peter is speaking about the name. Luke is telling us the name that’s at the center of this entire story, the name of Christ. Now the name of Christ, throughout the New Testament, represents more than just His identity, what you would call Him. I think it represents three main facets of who He is.

### **We know His person.**

First of all it represents His person and so if we’re going to walk in the name of Christ, as a community of faith, then we need to know His person. Number one, we know His person. It’s all about who He is. It’s very interesting, you come to Acts 4, we’ve spent the last three weeks studying Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 and it’s strangely similar—the whole sermon here that he speaks in Acts 3 and Acts 4.

Look at Acts 3:12. Listen to what Peter says and just kind of read over a little bit of this and I want you to see if you can get a feel for exactly what we saw Peter saying in Acts 2.

*“When Peter saw this, he said to them: ‘Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life’”* (Acts 3:12-15).

What an amazing statement. *“You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this”* (Acts 3:15). Then he says, *“By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see”* (Acts 3:16).

It's the same exact things that Peter was saying in Acts 2 here, again in Acts 3. God raised Him from the dead. This is Jesus who was talked about way back in the Old Testament. We saw Peter doing that throughout Acts 2. He's lifting up the person of Christ—"This is the One who is glorified by God. This is the Holy and Righteous One, the author of life, and you've killed Him. You've murdered Him." And so when you get to Acts 3:19, you see Peter give the same invitation that we talked about last week. *"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord"* (Acts 3:19). Peter is exalting the person of Christ.

### **We trust His power.**

So we know His person. Peter had to know who Christ was in order to proclaim in the name of Christ. But not just to know His person, second, I want you to see that we trust His power. Now this is where the name of Christ really comes out. Luke is very intentional, not just here in Acts 3 and 4 but in many places to show us the power of the name of Christ.

Think about how we've seen it already, Acts 2:38, the name of Christ is preached, 3,000 people are saved. Here it's emphasized in Acts 3 and 4, another couple of thousand are added to their number and this continues throughout the rest of the Book of Acts, the power of Christ being expressed through the name of Christ. Let me show you a couple more instances here in the Book of Acts.

Look at Acts 8:12. Give you a couple more occurrences where the name is mentioned that you can circle. Acts 8:12, Philip is preaching. All these people have been carried away by this guy named Simon the sorcerer and Acts 8:12 says, *"But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."* So the gospel is still advancing even more through the name of Christ.

Look at Acts 9:27. This is talking about Barnabas and Saul, who we know is Paul. Look at how two versus in a row the name of Christ is mentioned.

*"Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles," in verse 27, "He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord"* (Acts 9:27-28).

Let me show you three more. Look at Acts 15:26. It's important that we look at these different instances so that we see the consistency that the Scripture is trying to communicate to us. Look at Acts 15. Let's start on verse 25, *"We all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Acts 15:25-26).

Two more. Look at Acts 16, the very next chapter, verse 18. Just to get a picture, starting on verse 16,

*"Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.' She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name*



*of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!’ At that moment the spirit left her” (Acts 16:16-18).*

Isn’t that a great picture? Paul, he’s had enough. The last couple days this lady keeps yelling so he turns around and he says, “All right, enough. In the name of Christ come out of her.” So the spirit leaves her by the power of the name of Christ.

One more instance, look at chapter 19. I want you to look at verse 13,

*“Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, ‘In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.’ Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them” (Acts 19:13-15).*

This has got to be one of those humiliating moments for some people in the New Testament. “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you” (Acts 19:15)? Isn’t that great? “Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding” (Acts 19:16). That’s not a good day for those guys. Look what happened,

*“When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (Acts 19:17-20).*

Do you have the picture? The name of Jesus Christ all throughout the Book of Acts, when it’s preached people are being saved. When it’s preached people are giving their lives for it. When it’s preached evil spirits are coming out. When it’s preached people who do all kinds of evil and immorality are taking their immorality, bringing it and burning it. Amazing things happen.

What I want you to see is that 2,000 years ago there was a name that when it was proclaimed and when it was preached, people were saved and people were healed and people’s lives were changed. The people who were completely against Christ were now for Christ. Amazing things happened and what I want you to know is today the name is still good. It’s the same name of Christ that we come together to exalt today and to proclaim today. The power of the name of Jesus. They were confident in the name of the One who saved them.

### **We show His presence.**

We know His person, we trust His power and then we show His presence and this goes right into what we just saw in Acts 19, the presence of Christ demonstrated by His name. These guys trying to get in on a little bit of the action with the name of Christ, “Hey, we’re going to do this. In the name of Jesus come out.” And the evil spirits said, “We don’t know who you are. You don’t have the presence of Christ in you.”

Peter though, remember back to John 5? Peter had seen Jesus walk up to a lame man sitting by a pool called Bethesda. He’d seen Him, nobody else around to help him out. The guy said I have no one. Peter had seen Jesus walk up to this guy and say, “Get up and

walk.” The guy picked up his mat and began to walk. Peter had seen that and Peter knew, don’t miss it in John 14:12, Jesus had said to him as well as the others, “You’re going to do even greater things than I do because I’m going to the Father.”

Don’t miss it. When it comes to the name of Christ what we’re seeing play out in the Book of Acts is the presence of Christ. How could Christ be the hero in Acts 3 and 4? He’s the hero because He is at the right hand of the Father and He has poured out in His presence in the lives of Peter and John and He is working through them and that’s exactly what he’s doing today, two thousand years later.

Christ is at the right hand of the Father and He lives in us, He dwells in us and He works through us. It was Jesus who healed this man. Peter made that very intentionally known. It was Jesus who healed this man and He did it through Peter.

So the question is, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Birmingham, at The Church at Brook Hills with all the needs represented in this room, as well as outside of this church, how is Jesus going to comfort? How is Jesus going to heal? How is Jesus going to strengthen? How is Jesus going to reach out and come and encourage those who are walking through all kinds of different struggles? How is He going to do that today? Through His presence in your life and in mine.

We are the hands and feet of the person, the power and the presence of Jesus Christ. Is that not an amazing truth? Believers, it is time we stand up and realize that Christ wants to live through us. The life that we see in the Gospels now being portrayed through His people in the Book of Acts. So how does Jesus doing comfort amidst hurt? He does it through the people who are confident in the name of Christ that has saved them. As we surround each other, as we see hurts and feel them and begin to touch them, we begin to see the presence of Christ use us to do what Christ alone can do.

Let’s step back behind that curtain and see the role of the community of faith in Rashel’s life.

#### *Rashel Ross*

I went to church this morning and it was amazing. It was about grief. How appropriate. They sang, *Make Me Glad*, and it touched me to the core. The love and support that has surrounded me is overwhelming. Even people I don’t know are praying and encouraging me. I so need that right now. There is no way I could do this alone.

Today, Heather, Shannon and Tawny all assisted me in getting a shower. I can’t stand up on my own for very long. I’m still fatigued like I’ve never known before. So I saw myself in the mirror for the first time today. It didn’t scare me as bad as I thought it would. It was bizarre for me. Incisions are reminders that this cruel reality is real. I keep my mind focused on what’s to come, or at least I try to.

Thursday evening, the 7<sup>th</sup>, some of my closest friends came over to shave my head. We went out in the back yard and I told them to do what they had to do but I didn’t want to look until the very end. I was so nervous about Max seeing me when he returned on the 10<sup>th</sup>. His dad and I had talked on Saturday evening before he was coming home on Sunday and it was brought up that his dad should show him pictures of women with shaved heads to give Max a visual image of what mine might look like.

On Sunday when Max came in I got down on my knees and I smiled real big. I was wearing a baseball cap. He smiled, took my hat off and gave me a noogie and exclaimed, “I like it.” Kissed my head and then ran off to play. He loves my bald head, often giving me kisses on

it and he can't refrain from proudly asking me to show just about every one we come in contact with, "Show them your head, Mom."

First Lord, let me say thank you. Thank you for loving me tangibly through my community. I admit I'm curiously anxious, if that's even possible, about how we will financially make it through this season. It will require you making the impossible, possible.

Thank you, Lord, for Max. Help me to teach him. Help me to love him in way that brings honor to you. I always feel like I'm messing up with him. Maybe all parents feel like that. I want the best for him. He's my baby.

Happy New Year. I'm thrilled to bring in the New Year. Fresh starts are welcome to me. This time of year I reflect on the changes in my life, how I'm different, areas that still are lacking and the excitement of the unexpected adventure that lies ahead.

As I embark on 2006, I leave behind a season of loss and face a season of new beginnings and hope for the future. I don't leave 2005 bitterly, but rather respect it, what it was to me and how it changed me.

One year later, it's hard to believe it has been one year. It feels good to sit here, not perfect. Of course, I could always think of things I need and want, but I remember eating broccoli and chicken after my first treatment and it didn't make me sick and it didn't taste like metal. I remember literally being elated that I was able to make Max breakfast and drive him to karate. I remember, on a daily basis, getting more cards, emails and phone calls then I could keep up with. Yep, it feels good to sit here. My cup runneth over.

*David Platt*

He may take away but He never stops giving and He gives through the expressions of His people, it's what we're seeing in the New Testament Church. How does Jesus give to someone who's walking a journey like this? He gives through us. He gave through the early church. They were concerned about the hurts of those around them and confident named the One who dwelled in them, who lived in them, to meet those needs.

### **They were committed to the glory of the God who worked through them.**

A final characteristic I want us to see in the early church is that they were committed to the glory of the God who worked through them. They were committed to the glory of God who worked through them. With the church growth they were experiencing in Acts 3, with the amazing scene that we see happen in Acts 3:1 and 10 it would be very easy as they rushed – the crowds rushed to hear what has happened, to see this guy, just as we see at other points in the Book of Acts. Sometimes people are ready to call Paul a god, ready to lift up and worship Peter and John and what Peter and John do is they stand up and they begin to proclaim the gospel and they begin to give glory to the one who was working through them.

### **When we care sacrificially ...**

I want you to see what happens when God's people care sacrificially. Three things in this passage that happened when God's people cared, sacrificially. Number one, when we care sacrificially the crowd is attracted. I want you to see the role this miracle, this wonder that happened in Acts 3:1 and 10, why did that happen? What was the role that was playing? I

want you to look at Acts 3:11. It's a great picture. It follows up on the heals of this story. It says, *"While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade"* (Acts 3:11). Why was this guy healed? So that this picture in Acts 3:11 would be set up.

You've got this guy who's standing for the first time in his life. He's got his arms wrapped around Peter and John. I don't know if he's got his arms around their neck, kind of, with this kind of picture or grabbing his arms around their waist, I don't know. But it's an incredible picture of this guy so elated because he's now walking. He's got his arms around these guys. The crowd is attracted. The crowd wants to know more.

And that's how it works throughout the New Testament and how it works today. The people become interested in the gospel when they see the effects of the gospel and the community is saved. Let's say that one more time. People become interested in the gospel when they see the effects of the gospel in the community of faith called the church. When people see the love of Christ, the power of Christ, the person of Christ, the presence of Christ in us then they will want to know more about why? What is going on? Why is this happening? And so they come flocking to hear, the crowd is attracted by this wonder.

Second, not only is the crowd attracted, but the Word is illustrated. Peter preaches, we've already seen how he preached the sermon. I want you to come over to Acts 4:13-14. I want you to listen to these two versus that really summarize the leaders response. The leaders were not happy, they wanted Peter and John to stop this. It says in verse 13 of chapter 4, *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus"* (Acts 4:13). It speaks to the presence of Christ. Now, listen to verse 14. *"But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say"* (Acts 4:14).

What do you say when the man is walking for the first time in his life? You're silenced. You're trying to speak against the gospel because you just haven't heard it preached. You've seen it incarnated. You've seen its power at work.

I want you to think about how that relates to 21<sup>st</sup> century culture today. Even in Birmingham, as well as many places throughout our country, there's a lot of people who are hard toward the gospel. Whenever I travel to college campuses I'm always amazed at some of the hardness that is there among students on college campuses towards the gospel. And many of you know people in your life that want nothing to do with the gospel.

But what happens when those people who have hardened hearts begin to see the love and the care and the grace and the mercy of Christ in extravagant ways, expressed sacrificially thorough people, those hearts begin to soften and begin to open themselves up to, "What is this?" Because the Word is not just being preached to them, the Word is being illustrated.

In the French Quarter of New Orleans in the homeless ministry we had there over the last six years, I found out real quickly that that is one of the most evangelized places in the United States. Anybody in that area who wants to go on a mission trip goes to New Orleans. When they get to New Orleans they think well the French Quarter needs the gospel, we're going to go there. And so what happens is there are homeless men and women and tarot card readers and fortunetellers in the middle of Jackson Square who, literally, have a track put in their face every single day, if not two or three.

And we found out real quickly that it was going to be six or eight months before they would even begin to listen to us, six or eight months of going and just sitting there and spending time with them. Yes, sharing the gospel throughout. Not waiting, we're going to wait six months until we share the gospel. Sharing the gospel throughout, but six to eight months of sharing the gospel and seeing the gospel in our lives before many of them began to come to know Christ, before their lives began to be changed. The Word must be illustrated in the church. Our witness is hollow without sacrificial care for the hurts of people around us.

So the crowd is attracted, the Word is illustrated and, ultimately, the Lord is exalted. I want you to look at Acts 4:21 and 22, "*After further threats,*" verse 21 says, "*they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old*" (Acts 4:21-22). And there we see the picture. The result of this whole thing.

Now, remember Acts 3, this guy's sitting there. Obviously, he has a physical need but look deeper into the passage. This guy had a physical need to walk but where was he sitting? He was sitting right outside the temple. The place that in the Jewish mindset was where you would encounter the glory of God and where you can encounter the presence of God and worship God and here's a guy who sits there day in and day out but is never able to go in.

And so for the first time he is able to stand up and walk. So what does he do? Does he run out praising God? No. He runs right into the temple, jumping up and down, praising God. This guy's physical need was great to be healed, but his spiritual need was even greater, to give glory to God, to know what it means to have a heart that encounters His glory and worships Him for who He is.

And so that's what this guy starts doing. So the people come, they hear the gospel preach and they start doing the same thing and they're praising God and their religious leaders are actually mad that God is being praised.

That's weird. Why are religious leaders mad? Because they missed the point. They've gotten so consumed with the religious motions that you go through, that somewhere along the way they missed the point. Is the danger not there for us today to do the same thing? But the needs represented in this room, as well as the needs throughout Birmingham and the world, to become so consumed with religious motions and doing the law right and being holy by separating ourselves from the world that somewhere along the way we miss out on the fact that holiness involves penetrating the world and making the gospel known in the dirtiest, darkest places there are.

### **The Bottom Line ...**

And that's when the Lord is exalted. And they couldn't stop it. Everybody's praising God because of what they had seen. Isn't it beautiful how God in His grace and mercy takes our deepest needs and our deepest struggles? He raises up His people, through them shows His power and His presence to the end that in our deepest needs and our deepest struggles He ends up getting glory for His provision and His grace and His mercy. God delights in showing His grace and His mercy in our deepest points of need. And He delights in doing it through His presence in us.

I want you to hear a story that goes along with this whole journey we've seen in Rashel's life. It gives evidence of what happens when a people surround each other in their hurts and give God the glory amidst the difficulty and the pain.

I'm going to ask Jason, who has taken the picture that you see behind us as well as many other pictures, as he has walked through with Rashel on this journey. I'm going to ask him to share a little story from something that happened early on that really gives an illustration of exactly what this text is talking about.

*Jason*

My wife Heather and I have gotten to know Rashel over the last several years and we've become very close friends with her. Rashel's worked with me in the last three years. We were in Northern California on vacation when we got a call that Rashel had cancer and we prayed fervently and intentionally and a lot while we were there.

On our way back down towards San Francisco we stopped in Muir Woods, which is a really just intensely – just it shows the magnitude of God's grace and God's majesty and how awesome He is. And we saw these redwoods, these coastal redwoods and I like to know about the things that I see and so as I was looking at these redwoods, we had learned through one of the parks in the information they gave us that fairy rings are these things that would pop up whenever a redwood tree was damaged or hurt and we actually – you know, I thought that was very cool and it reminded me of the community of faith in the church and the body and how all of these trees – they're the biggest most majestic trees, but they're all connected underground through the same root system and some people would even say they may be one tree.

And so we saw, while we were walking through Muir Woods, we saw this picture. We saw what a fiery ring was. We saw a tree damaged in the middle and these other trees that had grown up around it. I took the picture while we were there because it was after we had found out about Rashel's cancer and we were very blessed with the community of faith, just a local small extension of God's body. And I knew that this would be the picture of what we were about to walk through, what we were about to experience.

I took that picture for us, for Rashel. It was never intended to be life sized on a stage in front of this many people. It was intended to be an encouragement for her and for our part of the body of Christ. So when we returned home the night before Rashel's first surgery we had a gathering at our house. We gathered together, we tried to fellowship as normal as possible. We ate, of course, and we sang.

We sang a song that Rashel was impacted by and it made me glad. It just is a story – is a bold statement of faith in the midst of trials, in the midst of struggle. We sang that song, we prayed and we attended to the needs of our sister, a part of the body of Christ and so this picture was represented that night and we hung it in Rashel's house so that it could be a continued reminder of what God was doing through her community of faith.

*David Platt*

This picture is what the body of Christ is all about, about people with hurts and needs and when those struggles come for a body of people who surround each other and pray for each other and encourage each other and support each other and see the hurt and begin to feel that hurt along side each other and begin to do what we can to touch the hurt with the power of Christ.

That is the picture of the fellowship in the early church and it's a picture, I pray, that we play out here. There are, as I mentioned earlier today, an infinite variety of needs represented today. Physical struggles, emotional struggles, spiritual struggles, financial struggles, whatever they may be but I want us to have a time where we live out this picture in the response to this Word.

Okay, let's play out the body of Christ in this room and let's illustrate this picture in the Word. Let's pray for one another.

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