

# FREE FOR ALL

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Acts 3:1-10

November 16, 2008

(COMMITMENT SUNDAY)

I have something to tell you this morning. Something that just isn't ... well, to be honest with you it just isn't easy to *talk* about. But I think you deserve to know the truth. So here it is: I'm addicted to sugar-free popsicles. Can't get enough of them. Really. There are three or four boxes of them stashed in our freezer right now. And when it gets down to two boxes I begin to get nervous. Because you never know when the urge will come. It may be at noon. It may be at midnight. It may come at the break of day. Or smack in the middle of preaching a sermon! You just never know.

And if there aren't *any* popsicles in the freezer, it's a terrible thing. I've been known to make late night excursions to the Kroger store just to slake this horrible thirst (or hunger, or whatever it is you *have* for a popsicle). And I've been caught a time or two by some of you. And it's always a little embarrassing. Members of the flock see their pastor making a bee-line for the "fifteen-items-or-less" checkout lane trying to hide what he has from them. You see something like that and you must wonder what's going on over there in the parsonage late at night. You think maybe it's hard liquor. Or communion wine from some other denomination. And then you see that it's worse than you thought. The man has popsicles -- dozens of them. Sugar-free popsicles. More than you've ever seen in one place at one time. And it's awkward. It's just -- it's not what you'd expect.

It's like the woman in Huntington -- an elderly woman, mind you, from the church there in Beverly Hills -- who went to this new place that had just opened out near the mall there in Barboursville.

**Southern Exposure** it's called, with a capitol X. She went in there because *she* thought it was a fried chicken place. And boy was *she* embarrassed. 'Cause what they were serving there wasn't fried chicken, at all. It wasn't even on the menu. So it was an awkward moment for her, I'm sure. And she was afraid someone would see her there and think horrible things about her -- a church lady, mind you. So she skedaddled! ran back to her car, put the pedal down, and laid rubber right there in the parking lot. And when the policeman pulled her over ... she couldn't find her driver's license! So she told the officer exactly what had happened. And he laughed so hard he cried. So he let her off with a warning and said, "Ma'am, from now on, stick with Colonel Sanders."

And *that's* how it feels to be caught with boxes of popsicles in brown plastic bags at quarter to one in the morning.... Well, maybe not *just* like that. But it *is* embarrassing. ✚ And so is this -- It happens to me at district minister's meetings or at annual conference in Buckhannon -- the ushers come with the offering plates and you reach down in your pocket for something to put in it. But there's nothing there. Not even a dollar. Not a *penny*. And it's an awkward moment. Because ushers don't accept debit cards, you know.

So there you sit, empty-handed, wondering what they're thinking. "This guy doesn't care. *He* doesn't love Jesus. And look at his name tag! He's a preacher! Somebody laid hands on this loser. Ordained him! And he won't even put a dollar in the offering plate!"

Happens to me all the time. Which is embarrassing enough. But then the person sitting next to you reaches into *his* pocket, pulls out a dollar bill and hands it to you (the way he does for his three-year old grandkid) And it's just awkward. I mean, what do you do in a situation like that? Do you offer to pay him back? Or just let it go? What do you do?

Well ... it happened to me one night at conference. I had nothing to offer. Not even a penny. And my friend Steve handed me a ten dollar bill to put in the offering. And I took it and put it in the plate. And when the usher moved on, I said, "Thanks, man. That was very kind of you. Thank you." And he looked at me and said, "I didn't give it to you, **pea-brain**. That was for Jesus." ✠

There's a man who stands across the street from the Town Center in Charleston asking for help -- a few dollars, he'll say, so he can get a hamburger somewhere. And sometimes, if you've been to Chili's or The Outback or some place in the mall and you're carrying a doggy bag or some leftovers, he'll ask if he can have them. He's so thin it almost hurts to look at him. And then, all of a sudden, he wasn't there anymore. I didn't see him for months. And then he was back at his spot, asking for food or a few dollars or whatever you could give him. And he looked great! It was amazing. He wasn't so thin any more. He'd gained some weight. Looked healthy and strong.

I told him he looked good and that I'd missed seeing him around. I was afraid something had happened to him. Thought he might have been sick. But that wasn't it. He said, "No. I'm all right. I just got into a little trouble is all... and I was in jail," he said.

I have to be honest. I *like* the guy. I like *talking* to him. I don't know why, really, I just do. And I know people think he should just get a job and stop begging on the streets. But he's not the sort of person who could hold down a job. Or even get hired. He has problems. *Emotional* problems. *Mental health* problems. So he stands there and asks for whatever people are willing to give him. And the sad thing is he lives better **in** jail than he does **out** of jail. In jail he gets three meals a day. And he has water and soap and toothpaste and clean clothes.

So when I see him I always give him a few dollars. And I ask how he's doing ... and tell him it's good to see him. But here's the thing -- no matter how many times I do that, no matter how often anyone does that for him, it isn't enough. The leftovers take his hunger away for few hours, maybe. And the money... well, I don't really know what he does with the money. Maybe he wastes it or maybe he doesn't. But whatever he does with it, the money won't last. It will always run out. And when it does he has to go right back there and ask and hope and pray that somebody will let him have a few dollars more.

Every now and then I see him there and I don't have **anything** to give him. Not even a dollar. Not even a **dime**. And it's an awkward feeling, not to be able to give him something. You feel helpless, in a way -- that you just aren't any help.

Does that sound familiar? Churches are like that, I think. Or **can** be at times. The church at Blue Jay was like that -- and so was Mount Pisgah. They thought they had nothing to offer because they were small. Just a **handful** of people. And their annual budget was next to nothing. So they couldn't offer an after school program, or new music on Sundays, or robes for the choir, or even a TV for the Sunday School classroom. And *sometimes* they wondered where the money would come from to pay the utilities. And when they *did* pay them, mind you, there was hardly anything left for the church to work with. At Blue Jay we sold hotdogs to businesses all over Beckley and even had a walk-a-thon just to raise enough money to pay our apportionments for the year.

And all of that made them feel that they had nothing to give, nothing to offer as a church. There were children and youth in the community... and people who'd never been to a church. There were people there who were hurting and hungry for more in their lives --

people who needed to know and feel and believe that there is a God who can love people like them. A God who accepts them. A God is for them and not against them.

And the churches **wanted** to help them, believe me. But when they looked in their pockets (as a church) they didn't see anything there. They just couldn't see anything that would make any difference. And the sad thing is they had hearts as big as mountains. And wisdom and grace and friendship and love. But they didn't see that. They were looking for something else, I think. Something some *other* church had. Resources and programs. The money for something bigger and better. But the truth is they already had everything they needed to be the church God wanted them to be. A church that is healthy and whole. A church that makes a difference in the world. But they just didn't see what was already there.

Do you ever feel that way? About yourself, maybe? Or about the church? ✠ This scripture has something to say about that. Something you and I and the church need to hear.

You heard it this morning.... Peter and John were on their way up to the Temple at three for midday prayer. And there was a man there with his hand out, asking for help. A few dollars, I guess, or whatever people would give him. Because he was one of those people who couldn't hold down a job (or even get himself hired). Because he was crippled. Handicapped. Physically disabled. Couldn't even take himself out to the street corner to beg. He had to be carried. Every day someone would carry him to the gate of the temple. And every day he would sit there with his hand out waiting for someone to come by and have a little sympathy, maybe, and give him a few dollars.

And one day, says Luke, he saw *Peter* and *John* on their way into the temple. And he held out his hand fully expecting to receive something from them. ✠ It makes sense, I think. They were people who prayed. Connected to God. People who were *trying*, at least, to live good, decent, God-pleasing lives. And surely if anybody's going to show a little mercy, it would be people like them. Churchgoers, mind you. Spiritual folk. People who *know* what it's like to *stand in need of a little mercy and grace*.

But when Peter and John came closer, they looked at the man and Peter said, "I don't a nickel to my name. Silver and gold... I just don't have it," he said. "But what I have I'll give you." And Peter looked at the man and said, "In the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, get up and walk." And he reached out, took the man by the hand and pulled him up to his feet. And as he did, the man's ankles and feet were strengthened and healed.

And he started walking! Walked right into temple -- the Lord's house, mind you, where people who were lame and sick and "just not right" were not wanted or welcome. He walked right in and started dancing around, praising the Lord.

And it was prayer-time, mind you. There were other people there. People were in there trying to pray, for heaven's sake. And here he comes a man dancing and singing and praising the Lord. Right there in God's house!

It caused quite a stir that afternoon. And when people saw who was making all the commotion, they couldn't believe it. Because they'd seen him before. "That's the lame man," they said. "The cripple. The beggar who's always out there expecting a handout. That's the man who can't walk!" And they all gathered round. And they were right. It was him. The man who was crippled and lame and

helpless was now healed and whole and standing there on his own two feet.... They just couldn't believe it.

And then, says Luke, Peter did it again. *For them*. The whole lot of them. He turned to the crowd and offered *them* Christ....

**Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you.**

What about you, church? What do you have? What will you give?

People do expect something from you, you know. I mean, after all, they see you coming here to God's house. They know who you are. You're church people. Christians. People who pray. You are the people in *their* lives who follow Jesus. People who must surely know a thing or two about forgiveness and grace. You're the ones who claim to love your neighbors and even your enemies. And you -- you Christians -- are the ones who say that God loves **them**. So they're looking to you. They expect something from you -- just like the lame man outside the temple who expected something from Peter and John.

So what will you give them? What do you have to offer here at First Church?

Well, we can't really promise that we have all the answers. Or that we know the secret to wealth and success. We can't even promise that the God we worship will give them an easy passage through life. Or bless them with a life free from struggle and heartache and sorrow and pain. We can't even promise they'll be *entertained* by our worship or be inspired somehow by "*the superior quality and excellence of our devotion*" (whatever that is). It just isn't what we have to offer here at this church.

But we *can* give them *something*. We can give them what we have. And what we have here is Jesus. Because **I am convinced that Jesus is here**. Jesus our Lord is here in this church. He dwells in your hearts, in your prayers and your praise. He makes himself known in your love and compassion. People see him in you when you let them know that you care about them -- when you pray for them, and encourage them, and when you love and accept them where they are.

And Jesus is here when we worship together. He's here when we serve our neighbors here in this community God calls us to serve. And he's here when we give him our prayers and our presence, our gifts and our service and ask him to take what we have and all that we are and make us a church that **praises** him and **serves** him and **brings others to him**.

You have something to offer them, church. You can offer them Christ. And that makes a difference -- much more of a difference than silver or gold. But let me tell you a little story just to show you what I mean.

A few years ago, somebody not so far from here saw a young boy on a bicycle out on the sidewalk. She was getting some groceries out of her car. And the boy asked if she needed some help. And she said yes. So he did. He helped her carry the groceries into the church. And there were some kids there -- not very many, just a handful.

They were there for the Wednesday night supper and children's program. U•Can•2 they called it. (It's what we call WOW here at First Church). And the woman asked the boy (who was terribly thin and obviously poor) if he'd like to stay and join them for supper. His name was DJ. And DJ said, "I have a brother and three sisters. Can they come, too?"

“Well, of course they can,” she said. So he went home and came back with his brother and sisters.

A week later, they were back. And when they came the next week there were even more of them. Those kids told some of their friends at school about the church -- about the people there who were kind, the people who welcomed them, and respected them, and loved them. And they kept coming. In fact, the U•Can•2 leaders were sure they would have had even more, “But the van only holds so many people,” they said. They also told me they could use a few more workers -- more volunteers -- because so many kids were coming on Wednesday evenings they didn’t know what to do.

And those children didn’t come by themselves. But somebody was with them. Somebody who loves them. And every time they came, he came there with them. Jesus came with them. Because that’s who they were. They were his little ones. Precious and beloved. The apple of his eye. And when they came -- I believe this, I do -- when they came to church, they would find him already there in the faces of all who received them. In the hands of those who would greet them. And in the hearts of all who loved them, and accepted them, and made them feel at home. (Even though there were a few in the church who thought they didn’t fit. “They don’t belong here. I came to Beverly Hills to get away from the trash,” one of them said.)

And then one weekend, their leader, Greg, told me that something wonderful happened. Those same kids -- our kids and God’s kids -- had a little picnic at the park. They had hamburgers from Wendy’s with fries and pickles and soft drinks and things. But one of the girls said, “I don’t really feel like eating.” For you see, there was a man in the park who was homeless and hungry. And he was picking berries (who knows what kind) because he was hungry.... She said, “Could we give him some of our food?”

And so they gave the homeless man some of their food. They did it because they didn't just see a homeless man, they saw somebody. Somebody who sees and feels and thinks and loves. They saw one of God's little ones, precious and beloved. And the man was thrilled. And they were thrilled. And Greg and Linda, their leaders, talked to them about honor and love and dignity and respect.

And Greg said the homeless man looked at them and said, "Thank you. I love you, too." And he said, "Tom, I don't know if anyone else noticed it. But he sounded a lot like Jesus... He sounded a lot like Jesus."

That church made a difference in the lives of those children. And those kids? Oh, I can't *begin* to tell you what a difference those children made in the lives of those church members. I couldn't even begin to tell you what a difference they made....

That's what you have to offer here, church. You can offer them Christ. You can offer the children and the youth and all of the people around you the greatest gift of all. You can offer them Christ.

And what greater gift could anyone offer than the gift of Jesus, the Word made flesh, who dwells among us.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

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