Preaching Series: The Four Building Blocks of Our Faith
Sermon Title: Loving Your Neighbor

Text: **Acts 3:1-10 -- Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. 3 Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. 4 And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. 6 But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. 8 And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.**

Introduction: Several years ago, ***30-year-old Tommy Larkin*** began searching for his long-lost biological brother. He didn't know how far he'd have to travel from his home in **Newfoundland, Canada** but he thought it was about time he reached out and made the connection. ***So, he contacted the agency that arranged adoptions for both boys when they were toddlers***. A short while later, a case worker called with the name and address of his brother. It turned out he was one **Stephen Goosney**, age 29. and, amazingly, he lived right across the street. "***I said . . . 'I am looking at the house right now!'***" recalls **Larkin**. With that, he walked out his front door and nervously made his way to the home of his neighbor and brother less than fifty yards away. Well, things went well and both men were elated at the prospect of getting to know each other. Now they spend time together nearly every day. "***We both have families***," **Goosney** said, "***but this is as close as it gets***." **Larkin**'s story is larger than life—his long-lost brother was a neighbor he'd simply never taken the time to get to know.

As you know, the Bible issues many commands for believers to follow, not the least of which is found in **Leviticus 19:18.** It says, "**You shall love your neighbor as yourself**" and was given by God

(*through Moses*) to the Jews as part of the Law. Unfortunately, the Jews limited their application of the verse to the nation of Israel. This happened in spite of the fact that in the same set of verses they were told to love the foreigner living in the land as themselves (**Leviticus 19:34 -- You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself**). Because of their narrow understanding of loving their neighbors, Jesus told ***the Parable of the Good Samaritan*** to explain that a "***neighbor***" is any person who possesses a legitimate need that we are in a position to meet (**See Luke 10:25-37**). **He wants us to think of our "*neighbors*" whom we're called to love as those, like the alien living in Israel or the man lying unconscious on the side of a road, who may or may not be a part of the people of God, but who have real and legitimate needs that we can help meet.** Sometimes, they are the unchurched people we live next door to or work alongside of. Or they may be the people who attend our children's soccer games and dance recitals. These people look just like we do and share many of the same challenges, but what they lack is the loving concern expressed by a neighbor who is willing to stand in the gap and offer them help when they really need it.

We are now into our eighth message in the series -- **The Building Blocks of Our Faith**. It's based on our strategy for making disciples of Christ which emphasizes the following vision: WORSHIP, GROW, SERVE AND SHARE. This morning, we're into our second sermon on serving. Please open your Bibles to **Acts 3**.

Sometime after Peter preached his sermon on ***the Day of Pentecost*** with the result that 3,000 people believed, he and the Apostle John happened to be going up to the temple as was their custom to pray. As they went up the steps leading from ***the outer courts*** (i.e. *the court of the Gentiles*) to ***the inner courts*** (*made up of the court of the women, the court of Israel and the court of the priests*), they found a lame man at ***the Beautiful Gate*** who had been carried there by his friends so that he could beg for alms. Beggars in Palestine, we know, favored three locations: **(1) the homes of the wealthy who had the means to help** (**Luke 14:1-2 -- One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. 2 And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy**); **(2) along main highways where many people passed by** (**Mark 10:46 -- And as Jesus was**

leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside); and **(3) the temple**. Of them, the last was the best site because people who came there daily to offer sacrifices would have seen the opportunity to help the man as a way to gain favor with God. ***From this story and the example of Peter and John we are given three principles about how to love our neighbors the way God loves us***.

Loving your neighbor the way God loves you requires that you give BECAUSE you can (**Acts 3:1-5 -- Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. 3 Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. 4 And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them**). Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, recorded at the end of chapter two that when the Holy Spirit came ***to indwell believers permanently*** and ***to provide Christ's followers with the power to be His witnesses***, the result was that '**Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles** (**Acts 2:43**)." This story here in **Acts 3** is leading up to <u>one</u> of these miraculous signs. **Peter and John** (*as well as the other apostles*) **knew that they had been given authority by Christ over the things that bring suffering to man, just as our Lord had done for them once before** (**See Luke 9:1-2**). Only this time, because the Spirit came to indwell them permanently, the power was theirs not for a short season but for the duration. ***That's why they stopped to offer their help***. In the past, they went to the temple and most likely passed by the very same man, but did nothing each time. On this occasion, however, it was different. **For the first time since Christ had ascended to heaven, Peter and John were able to help the lame man and they knew it**.

The Book of Acts is the account of the formation and life of the early church. It documents how the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to take the Gospel to the world, ***giving of themselves whenever the opportunity arose as a way of demonstrating Christ-like love to their neighbors***. **And so, we read not only about Peter and John, but also of Paul as he healed a man crippled in his feet in Acts 14, cast an evil spirit out of a woman in Acts 16, healed**

those suffering from sickness and disease in Acts 19; and in Acts 20 raised a man from the dead. All these acts of love were undertaken because they were the best ways to demonstrate love for their neighbors!

This is the principle I want us to consider today. ***Because God has given all believers His Spirit, we possess the ability to love our neighbors in the same way God loves us and just as the early apostles did***. We no longer have to pass by and only wish something good for those who are in need. It is now within our power to recognize a need and meet it.

We all have various Christmas traditions. Few of us probably have a tradition quite like the Robynson family's. In his book Crazy Love, Francis Chan shares their story: This family of five, with three kids under the age of ten, chooses to celebrate the birth of Christ in a unique way. On Christmas mornings, instead of focusing on the presents under the tree, they make pancakes, brew an urn of coffee, and head downtown. Once there, they load the coffee and food into the back of a red wagon. **Then, with the eager help of their three-year-old, they pull the wagon around the mostly empty streets in search of homeless folks to offer a warm and filling breakfast on Christmas morning**. All three of the Robynson kids look forward to this time of giving a little bit of tangible love to people who otherwise would have been cold and probably gone without breakfast. Can you think of a better way to start the holiday that celebrates the God who is Love? (**Review: Loving our neighbor the way God loves you requires that you give BECAUSE you can**.)

Loving your neighbor the way God loves you requires that you give WHENEVER you can (**Acts 3:1-5 -- Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. 2 And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. 3 Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. 4 And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5 And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them**). **The opportunity to help meet a neighbor's need doesn't always come at the most convenient time**. For Peter and John, it occurred on their way to prayer at about 3 PM in the afternoon. They could have offered an excuse that most people would have

readily accepted: perhaps something like, "***We'd like to help but God must come first! If you're still here when we get back, then we'll see what we can do***." **They seemed to understand, however, that to delay would have been contrary to God's will**. So, they stopped what they were doing and ministered to the lame man because that's what was required of them in order to '**love their neighbor**' in this particular circumstance. Our Lord modeled this for the disciples and for us in **Matthew 14:6-14**. Herod Antipas had John the Baptist brutally murdered to fulfill a public promise made to the daughter of Herodias his wife, who danced before Herod's guests at a great banquet. **When Jesus learned of the news from His disciples, the Bible says he took them and withdrew to a lonely place**. ***I suspect he did this for a couple of reasons***: He knew His time had not yet come and so took action to keep Herod from seeking to have Him killed. In addition, the time away from the crowds allowed our Lord to reflect on the loss of His cousin and dear friend, John the Baptist. The only problem was that the people in the crowds saw Jesus and the disciples get into the boats and so they simply followed Him on foot. When He finally came to shore, there they were…hoping that He would minister to their needs. **I have to be honest, had I been in Christ's place, I'm quite confident I would have begged off and asked for the people to give me some space**. But Jesus refused. The Bible tells us in **Matthew 14:14** that He "**had compassion on them and healed their sick**." Later our Lord fed many thousands of those who came to listen to Him.

Why did Jesus do these things? I can only assume He did so because the opportunity presented itself. **To my knowledge, the Gospels do not record Jesus ever turning anyone away when they came to him with their needs**. **Whenever someone asked for help, He took care of them**. It seems that the apostles took the same approach to ministry in the book of Acts. Given the example of our Lord and His disciples, how can we do anything less? (**Review: Loving our neighbor the way God loves you requires that you give BECAUSE you can and WHENEVER you can**.)

Loving your neighbor the way God loves you requires that you give WHATEVER you can (**Acts 3:6-7 -- But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" 7 And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made**

strong). **Peter and John did not have any money to give to the lame man in response to his request for alms. I suspect that if they did and it would have been the best possible way to meet the need, they would gladly have given it**. After all, it was a mark of the early church that when they became aware of a financial need, they often were quick to help meet it (**Acts 2:44-45 -- And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need**). While they had no money to offer, they had something much better in mind for the lame man. **They had the power of the Holy Spirit to bring physical healing to him and that is what they offered**. "**Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk**," said Peter. And with those words, the man who had been born unable to walk since birth leaped to his feet and received the healing from Peter. (**Review: Loving our neighbor the way God loves you requires that you give BECAUSE you can, WHENEVER you can and WHATEVER you can**.)

As good as that moment must have been, it is worth noting, that much later in his life, **the Apostle Peter** contrasts the value of perishable things such as *silver or gold* (**which I'm sure the lame man was originally asking and hoping for**) with the precious blood of Christ that truly redeems us (**1 Peter 1:18-19 -- You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot**). **What was Peter saying**? **As good as it might be for us to SERVE others by being generous with our material blessings, we must never think that these sacrificial acts will save us from an eternity in Hell**. **No, we are saved not by works, no matter how noble and good our intentions were at the time, but by the shed blood of Christ on the cross for us**. It is through faith in His sacrifice for us that we are redeemed and restored to a right relationship with God.

Let me finish with these three consequences of LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR the way God loves you from Acts 3:8-10 where we're told, "And leaping up he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9 And all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking

for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.”

- **Loving your neighbors brings blessing to them**.
- **Loving your neighbors brings praise to God.**
- **Loving your neighbors brings wonder to others**. The word for “**wonder**” means “**to be stupefied or astonished**.” Those who witnessed the miracle could not wrap their minds around it. Why did it have this effect here in **Acts 3**? For two reasons I suspect: **(1)** Because **Isaiah 35:6** tells us that at the coming of the Messiah, the lame will leap like a deer. **(2)** Because real, self-sacrificing love is not that common in the world. When a person encounters it first-hand, the impact upon him is often profound.

Conclusion: A man who had no interest in spiritual matters related casually to the Christian who lived next door—they talked over the back fence, borrowed lawnmowers, and stuff like that. Then the non-Christian's wife was stricken with cancer, and she died three months later. The believer took it upon himself to minister and serve the grieving man. In response to his kindness, ***sent a letter to another family member sometime after his wife had passed. Here’s a portion of that letter***: I was in total despair. I went through the funeral preparations and the service like I was in a trance. After the service, I went to the path along the river and walked all night. But I didn't walk alone. My neighbor—afraid for me, I guess—stayed with me all night. He didn't speak; he didn't even walk beside me. He just followed me. When the sun finally came up over the river, he came over and said, "***Let's go get some breakfast***." I go to church now. My neighbor's church. A religion that can produce the kind of caring and love my neighbor showed me is something I want to find out more about. I want to love and be loved like that for the rest of my life. **May we demonstrate the same kind of love that God has for us by loving our neighbors and giving of ourselves because we can, whenever we can, and whatever we can.**