

Acts 4: 1-22

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.

So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

Our story picks up not long after the passage from last week, when Peter healed the Beggar at the Beautiful Gate. It comes immediately after the passage I talked about on Wednesday night, when Peter preached on the porch of the Temple. Where Jesus told parables, Peter did not beat around the bush. He told the people flat out that their leaders had crucified God's Messiah.

Now Peter and John are arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Temple. This is the same council who, just a couple months ago, condemned Jesus for blasphemy, and got the Romans to kill him for sedition.

The priests ask them how they healed this man. Attorneys in court never ask a question to which they don't already know the answer, and they know the answer. It's why they had Peter and John arrested. But they ask anyway, to get it on the record. And maybe to give Peter and John a chance to back out of this, to say something like, "We don't know," or to point the finger at someone else. I think the priests hoped that this whole Jesus of Nazareth thing would just go away.

But that's not how things work.

As you might expect from all the stories of Peter with Jesus, Peter doesn't know how to back down. I'm sure that he remembers Jesus' words back in Luke, "When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and

the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.”<sup>1</sup>

Where he was straightforward at the Temple, he becomes downright blunt here. He tells the priests that the man was healed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they crucified, and whom God raised from the dead. He tells them that they personally had God’s Messiah in front of them and they missed it. He tells them that their job as priests was to build on what Jesus did, and that, instead, they tried to throw him and his work away. And he points to the man whom everyone knew was lame from birth, and who has been healed. It’s hard to argue with that kind of evidence.

The priests don’t know how to respond to this. Peter and John are not educated men, scholars or rabbis. These are blue-collar guys. They’re not playing the kinds of legal and word games that the priests expected; Peter and John are not even equipped to play those kinds of games with the experts.

The Sanhedrin kick Peter and John out of the room in order to talk about them. They don’t dare have them crucified like they did with Jesus: the situation is entirely different. Governor Pontius Pilate has gone back to

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:11-12.

his capital,<sup>2</sup> and taken most of his soldiers with him. Instead of a crowd that is easily swayed to demand their crucifixion, Peter and John have five thousand people convinced that they speak for God. They have this man, whom everyone has seen begging for forty years, standing, walking and dancing.

So they warn Peter and John not to preach in Jesus' name, and send them on their way. Peter tells them that they're not going to obey, but they release them anyway.

Last week we sang about, "If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul." Preaching like Peter seems pretty simple, if a bit scary. You tell the truth as you know it. Period. No matter who your audience is.

But Peter tells the priests something that sticks, or it should: "Whether it's right in God's eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. As for us, there's no question—we can't keep quiet about what we've seen and heard."

He tells the truth, but he is not responsible for what other people do with it – they are. He is responsible to tell the truth of Jesus Christ, and let other people do with it what they will.

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<sup>2</sup> Caesarea Maritima, on the Mediterranean coast about halfway between the modern cities of Tel Aviv and Haifa.

Some people will never get it, no matter how many times they're told. But don't underestimate the power of planting a seed. Paul, the prototype for all church planters, wrote about planting a seed, and a man named Apollos watering it, but God making it grow.<sup>3</sup>

When we tell the truth of Christ, it may change things obviously and immediately. It's great when that happens. But it doesn't happen very often.

It may take a while, even years, to have any visible effect. That's okay. The God for whom "a thousand years are like one day,"<sup>4</sup> has time.

There's one more piece of preaching like Peter, though. Peter didn't use just his words. He acted on what he knew, and that made the difference. Five thousand people didn't listen to what he said until he healed the beggar.

Likewise, people will often not listen to our words until they see our actions. They won't listen to what we say about Jesus until they see the difference in what we do. Until they see us being kind and loving and forgiving, even to people who don't deserve it.

Our actions preach louder than our words. And our actions and our words must say the same thing, or what they say is that we don't really believe what we say we believe.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:6-10.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8.

I don't mean just the big things that we do. The little things are often much more important. How we do things. How we make people feel. The poet Maya Angelou famously said that, "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel."

Ms. Angelou is right. If you make someone feel small and insignificant, they remember that forever. If you make someone feel important, and valued, they remember that, too.

This isn't a surefire way to be popular, particularly with those in power. The world out there is full of the message that ordinary people are unimportant, even worthless. The world resists the idea that people are valued, even that they are valuable. But it is true. Every person out there is made in the image of God, and loved by the same God who loves you.

The cashier at the grocery store.

That one kid in your class.

And especially the people who cannot shelter in place, the people who are out there working so that the rest of us can be safer.

They may not be kind, or loving, back. That's okay. We're not responsible for what they say, or do. We're responsible for what we say, and do, and how we do it.

I pray that all of us this week would preach Jesus' message of love with boldness. With our words, yes, with our actions, yes, but most importantly with how we treat people. All the people.

In Christ's holy name,

Amen.