

Sermon Series: Summer Reading

Sermon Title: Holy Boldness

Acts 4:1-22

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To understand the encounter between Peter, John and the religious authorities, we need to back up for a moment to the previous chapter and see just how we got here.

“Peter and John had been heading up to the Temple in Jerusalem at about 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon, when they saw a man who had been unable to walk since birth begging by the Gate. Peter says to him, "I have no gold or silver, but what I have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!" And the man not only stands and walks, but starts leaping around in joy and delight at what has happened to him.

Now you might think that the whole community would start celebrating as well, and they might have, had Peter been able to refrain from talking. But this is Peter, and as we saw last week, he just can't help himself and he starts preaching. 'I wasn't the one who did this,' he said. 'It wasn't our power at all that caused this healing. It was the power of God, and the power of faith in the name of Jesus.' (v. 3:12-16) Jesus is Lord and is the one who heals and saves.

But Peter didn't stop there. He kept on preaching until finally he and John were arrested and brought before a who's who of the religious authorities of the day. There are priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, and they aren't rejoicing because a desperately needy man was healed. They are all angry. And the reason for the backlash becomes clear in their question: 'By what power did you do this? Who gave you this authority?' Now see how they reframed the issue? The issue was no longer healing, resurrection, restoration and the mercy of God. Now the issue is power.

They didn't ask, "How did this happen?" or "What is the meaning of this?" They asked, "Where did you get the power to do this? Who authorized you to do and say these things?" Stephen Montgomery comments, "You've heard of people with 'control issues', that's the religious authorities. They wanted people to be faithful and prayerful but to do so only under the exclusive banner of the temple and its protocols. But what we find again and again in these stories of the early church in The Acts, is a movement in which the Holy Spirit has spread like wildfire, out of control. The followers of Jesus could not be contained by normal channels or regulated by rules and structures." Here we see the uncontrollable, unpredictable power of God let loose on the world. And those in authority are threatened. Because, what happens to them if God can work outside the so-called "normal" channels of authority? I have seen any number of congregations choose control over faithful ministry because following the movement of the Spirit just seemed too risky, too messy, like it might get out of hand and they just couldn't imagine

letting go. And so instead of a spirit filled movement they have settled for rules, and committees, and proper procedures. They know precisely who has the authority and when it can be used. And so perhaps this is why it is difficult for many churches to say to their hurting, broken, shackled world, “In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk”.

Now, please hear what I’m saying and what I’m not saying, this is not a call for a kind of anti-institutionalism. Peter and John are not saying, “Well because we love Jesus, we’re “spiritual but not religious”. They were, after all, on their way to the Temple.

And we know from the book of Acts that the earliest Christians spent much time in the Temple and the synagogues. There is no hint here that Christianity is anti-institution, or anti-organization or structure. No, as Tom Long suggests, the question is, “Is the institution responsive to the Spirit, or is it curved in on itself?” Are we responsive to the Spirit? Or even closer to home, am I? Am I responsive to the Spirit or more concerned with being in control? In other words, “Whenever political or religious authorities set themselves up as the only legitimate broker of what people need or can and can’t do, and then defend that authority, inevitably, the Holy Spirit will break down those structures.”¹ The Spirit blows where it will, with or without us. (John 3:8)

“You see, these temple authorities in Acts were not interested in the movement of the Spirit. They were interested in temple authority for its own sake. “By what power do you do these things?” they wanted to know. “Who told you to do this?” The message was clear: If the disciples wanted to do religious business in Jerusalem, then they needed to get a license from the temple power brokers. And Acts says that’s the kind of authority that needs to be questioned. “By the power of the name of Jesus,” answered Peter and John.”²

All that we do as the church, is not because of some kind of inherent power in the institutional structures of the Church, but by the power of the name of Jesus poured out upon the Church through the Holy Spirit. If we have any authority to say to the world “rise up and walk” it’s because of Jesus. In fact, because of Jesus we are compelled to say to world “rise up and walk”. We are compelled to not keep quiet but to bear witness with our words and our lives that in Jesus of Nazareth there is healing, restoration, and life.

The challenge for us as Church is not to become anti-institutional. We rely on institutions every day. Many of us are here because of some wonderful institutions – hospitals, schools, universities and more. The challenge is for the Church to be an institution, or an organized movement that is responsive to the Spirit and open to the transforming power of God. So, when faced with a decision to reach out into our community, to engage in new forms of ministry, to welcome

¹ Tom Long, *Feasting on the Word*.

² Stephen Montgomery, *Day 1*, April 2015.

certain people or not, to speak prophetically in the name of Jesus, or to take risks in our witness – as we consider all these matters - what should be in the forefront of our hearts and minds. In every committee meeting, every financial decision, every moment of programming and planning are we following Peter and John’s bold example and saying to the world, “in the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk”? In the name of Jesus Christ, there is for you healing, restoration, and life.

The questions that should occupy our time, are not how does this affect the institution, or does this help us maintain the institution as we know it, or will our actions be strictly and narrowly in line with every policy, or how do we protect the future of the institutional Church or the denomination as we know it? No, the question we should ask is, “how is what we are doing or saying a faithful response to the power of God at work within us, and how does it advance the witness of the risen the Christ?” In other words, are we shaping an institution, an organized movement at Boone UMC and across the larger denomination that is responsive to the Spirit or that merely helps us maintain power and control? Because a Church, built to help us maintain power and control is a house of cards that will not stand and cannot bear Kingdom fruit.

I love the story of Thomas Aquinas who upon entering the presence of Pope Innocent II, before whom a large sum of money was spread out on a table. The Pope observed, “You see, Thomas, the Church is no longer in that age in which she said, “Silver and gold have I none.” “True, Holy Father,” Aquinas replied; “and neither can she any longer say to the sick, ‘Rise up and walk.’” We need organization and structure, we need to lead and manage well. But even more, we need to be in tune with and responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit, even and especially when it makes us uncomfortable or seems to cut against the grain. After all, we serve a God who risked everything to love us.

Many of you are familiar with the story of John Wesley. Wesley was an 18th century Anglican priest who had become troubled by the complacency and inward focus of the church. The Church of England, in Wesley’s day, had largely become an aristocratic institution out of touch with the struggles and suffering of the average English citizen. Wesley saw a Church that was often unresponsive to the work of the Spirit, that was turned in upon itself, that was obsessed with the rules of proper church, and, while there were exceptions, was comprised of leaders who were more concerned with maintaining authority and control than with loving God and neighbor. Now Wesley wasn’t at all anti-Church, or anti-institution. He loved the Church and remained a faithful Anglican priest his whole life and he really wrestled with violating the rules of his church and doing things that were considered out of order. But he also sensed a powerful call for the Church to be and do more, to go to lost and hurting people and in the power of Jesus Christ say, “Rise up and walk.”

And so, building upon seeds that had been planted by others, Wesley began organizing lay men

and women in small groups for prayer, accountability, study, and mission. He went out into the streets and fields taking the gospel to the people, proclaiming, as he called it, “plain truth for plain people.” And he organized a system of lay preachers who would preach and teach and share the good news of God’s love wherever and whenever anyone would listen. And people responded and the movement grew like wildfire. Lives and communities were transformed. Like in Acts, early Methodism was an uncontrollable movement of the Spirit, and like in Acts, it threatened those who were in power. And so, Wesley was often asked by what authority or what power he was acting, and he was banned from pulpits, and driven out of towns, and the early Methodists were mocked as being overly emotional fanatics. They were in the company of Peter and John.

Towards the end of his life, when asked about the future of the movement he started, Wesley would often comment,

“I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.”³

Having the form of religion without the power is tempting. It actually requires very little of us. Faith becomes a box we check, a hobby, just something we do because it’s Sunday. But friends, as C.S. Lewis would say, “why are we content playing in a puddle, when we’re being offered a holiday at the ocean?” I’m mostly grateful for the organization and structure we have as church. It helps us get things done, its support and sustain ministry, it provides some accountability. But let’s be very clear, it is merely a means to a much greater end. And if we ever confuse the means for the mission then we’re in danger of becoming a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power.

Peter and John were all in, no holding back. They had witnessed firsthand God’s love for us, how Christ Jesus stretched out his hands, lifted us from the depths, set us back on our feet, and said “follow me”. To those more concerned with maintaining authority and control than responding to the Spirit, Peter and John said, “We can’t keep quiet about what we’ve seen and heard.” God give us that voice. Keep making us a church that can’t keep quiet so that others can rise up and walk. Amen.

³ John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Methodism*.