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The Acts of the Apostles
VI. A Prayer for Boldness
Acts 4:1-31

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Last Sunday we witnessed Peter and John healing a lame man outside the Beautiful Gate in the Temple.¹ What followed that healing was just as amazing. A huge crowd gathered because of the miracle, and Peter had then proclaimed to them that it was in the name of Jesus that this healing had taken place. The same Jesus who was crucified a few months earlier, but whom God had raised from the dead – proving that this same Jesus was nothing less than the promised Messiah sent by God to bring salvation. “*Repent, therefore,*” Peter had then proclaimed, “*and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.*”² And, as our passage this morning notes, over five thousand people, that very day, did just that – repented and turned to Jesus.

But what we also read this morning is that all of this commotion in the Temple – the healing and the proclaiming, not to mention all the converting – very quickly reached the ears of the religious leadership, the high priests, as well as the secular leadership, the Sadducees. And they are not amused. They quickly lay hands on Peter and John and have them thrown into prison. And the following morning, they convene an inquisition – not so much to examine the facts of the case, but simply to condemn Peter and John and put an end to their activities. Annas the high priest is there, as well as Caiaphas and John and Alexander – all members of the highest echelon of the priestly leadership in Jerusalem. Peter and John are dragged in front of this hostile tribunal, and they are asked: “*By what power or by what name did you do this healing?*” And remember – these are the very same religious leaders who conspired to have Jesus killed by the Romans. “*By what power or by what name did you do this healing?*”

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit says our text – which, in and of itself, is the fulfillment of a promise Jesus had made to His disciples, recorded in chapter twelve of Luke’s gospel: “*And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.*”³ Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit in that very hour, just as Jesus had promised, answers their question:

Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this

man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

The religious authorities are completely taken aback – not just by what Peter says to them, but perhaps even more by the absolute boldness, fearlessness, with which he makes his answer. This guy is a nobody, they think. Which leads to a moment of recognition on the part of the religious authorities – they recognize Peter and John as having been among those who with Jesus when they had Him crucified. A recognition that perhaps suggested to the religious leadership a similar remedy to this new problem. But they are constrained by two facts on the ground: one, the fact that the crowd is clearly behind Peter and John; and two, the really inconvenient fact of that really and truly now healed lame man standing right there in front of them. The religious authorities simply cannot deny the fact that this man was healed by Peter and John, and in the name of Jesus whom they crucified.

So the religious authorities adjourn for a moment to discuss all this among themselves: *“What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.”* They come back in with a plan to offer Peter and John a deal – they will let Peter and John off the hook provided they cease teaching, speaking, and/or healing in the name of Jesus. Peter and John refuse the deal, which astounds the religious leaders even more. Peter and John answer them: *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”* Which really sets off the religious leadership. But they are powerless to do anything other than fume inwardly and among themselves – because of the crowd, and because of the lame man now healed. And so Peter and John are released.

Christian boldness, I’d call it. Peter and John, boldly Christian – that’s what it is. Boldness not in the sense of being a jerk for Jesus. Boldness not in the sense of bullying others in Jesus’ name. Boldness not even in the sense of annoying others for the cause of Christ. But Christian boldness in the sense of being unwilling to compromise faith in Jesus, unwilling to compromise the confession of Jesus, unwilling to compromise obedience to Jesus in the face of any sort of peer pressure, in the face any sort of resistance from the world, even in the face of outright hostility from others. Christian boldness as indeed not being conformed to the world, but rather transformed by the renewal of our minds through the Way and the Truth and the Life of our living Lord. Christian boldness as being so filled with Jesus, so focused upon Jesus, so formed by Jesus that the world cannot help but see in us the power and presence of Jesus Himself displayed.

Christian boldness. One of my favorite Christian writers, Dallas Willard, once described Christian boldness in this way – and, for him, Christian boldness does not represent some form of super Christianity, but rather ordinary every day and everybody Christianity, meaning all Christians should be like this. Here is what he said:

The disciple or apprentice of Jesus, as recognized by the New Testament, is one who has firmly decided to learn from [Jesus] how to lead his or her life . . . as Jesus himself would do it. And, as best

*as they know how, they are making plans – taking the necessary steps, progressively arranging and rearranging their affairs – to do this.*⁴

Christian boldness, in everything we say and in everything we do, like Peter and John. Boldly Christian in each and every area of our lives: family, work, leisure, you name it – all of it belonging to Jesus, under the Lordship of Jesus, seeking to do as Jesus has asked us to do. Boldly Christian as we go about our daily living in this world God has made and is even now bringing to redemption. Boldly Christian – no matter what it costs us, no matter what opposition or ridicule we may face. Are you and I boldly Christian?

If we were put on trial for our faith, like Peter and John, what evidence could be presented against us? Would our family members be able to testify that our faith in Jesus Christ has been central in the shaping of our home life? Would our friends and co-workers be able to testify that they know us to be a person in whom the love of Christ burns deeply, and is expressed to others graciously? Would our check-books and calendars confirm that Jesus comes first in our priorities? Would church members be able to bear witness to the fact that we really are trying to live according to what we believe? Would strangers be able to bear witness that one encounter with us and they knew that there was something different, something good, something life-affirming about us? If we were put on trial for our faith, like Peter and John, what evidence could be brought forth that we also are boldly Christian? Are we, you and I, boldly Christian?

Let's leave that question hanging in the air for a while. We can wrestle with it on our own later today – although I suspect we already know the answer. Instead let's acknowledge another truth about ourselves and about the faith we profess. Namely, that it is really not any actual fear of persecution from the world that keeps us from being boldly Christian; rather it is our fear of Jesus – or, more specifically, our fear of how He might change us and reorder our lives if we let Him get too close to us, if we let His grace get down too deep into us. Jesus said, *“You will know the truth and it shall set you free,”*⁵ but what you and I hear in that is, “You will know the truth and it will make you odd, different from everybody else.” That is what you and I really fear, and that is what is most keeping you and I from being boldly Christian.

But what this story is telling us is not only that we are meant to be boldly Christian, like Peter and John; but also this story is reminding us of how it was that Peter and John became so boldly Christian. Because remember that if we are cowardly, Peter once was doubly so; if we are wavering, then Peter once was swaying like a palm tree in a hurricane. So how then did Peter become so boldly Christian? And, therefore, is it possible that we, who are no stronger, no braver than Peter was before his transformation, is it possible that we might become the same? And how might we become the same? Our story also gives us the answer to those questions.

After Peter and John are released by the religious authorities, they return to the church, which has gathered to hear about what had happened. And there Peter and John tell their story – what the religious leaders had said to them, and what words the Holy Spirit had given them to speak in reply. And the response of the whole congregation to this is both amazed and amazing. For first they lift up their voices together in a song of praise to God:

Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

*“Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed” —*

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

It is a song, a psalm, celebrating the profound and life-changing truth that God, the Creator, also rules over and redeems His Creation. That everything is under His authority, that all things in the end will submit to His will – His Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. And that is the beginning of Christian boldness – this conviction that everything the Bible tells us is really true. And not really true as in abstractly true, philosophically true – but real-world true. Meaning that Jesus really is alive, and really is the Way and the Truth and the Life we must trust and follow – not just for our salvation in the end, but for how best to live our lives in this world right here and right now.⁶ Christian boldness begins in receiving, believing, holding to the truth of the Gospel. That is why Peter refers to the resurrection of Jesus as proof that Jesus really was the Messiah – because the resurrection was the moment Peter suddenly knew that it was all true, that Jesus is both true and the Truth.

But it is what happens next which shows us how belief turns into transformed living, how fear and timidity becomes fearlessness and faith lived out boldly in our lives. Having sung that psalm of praise, that hymn about the truth, the congregation then joins together in prayer: *“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”* What a profound, unexpected, and powerful prayer! *“And now, Lord . . . grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness . . .”* Did you hear it?

In light of everything Peter and John had just gone through, the church doesn't pray for increased safety, they pray for courage in the face of danger. They don't pray to be released from their mission, they pray for their mission to be increased. And they don't pray to be excused from the conflict of being Christians in a hostile world, they pray for boldness to declare Jesus' name even in the face of that hostility. They are praying that their fears, like our fears, should be changed into faith – changed into boldly Christian faith. And the Holy Spirit answers their prayer by coming upon them in power and might.

And that, finally, is how Christian boldness takes root in our lives – only by the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon us and making us come passionately and powerfully and fully alive

in Jesus, to Jesus, for Jesus. That is how it happened in Peter; that is how it happened in John. And that is how it happened in the early church which then became so bold – even to the point of martyrdom – in proclaiming Jesus as Savior and Lord to all. The Holy Spirit granted their prayer for boldness.

So, if we would be boldly Christian, if we do desire to become someone whose life overflows with the graciousness of our Lord, then it is not so much a matter of trying harder, but rather of drawing nearer. Not so much a matter of gritting our teeth in determination, but of more frequently bending our knees in prayer. Not so much a matter of marshalling our inner strength to overcome our fears, but rather of allowing ourselves to be so filled by the power of the Holy Spirit that our fears shall be removed. The only One who can make us boldly Christian is Christ. And what this story shows us is that the nearer we draw to Him – or, rather, the nearer we allow Him to draw us to Himself – the more our faith shall become bold, the more our lives shall become fearless, the more our lips shall proclaim His salvation, the more our hearts shall burn with His holy love, and the more we shall be able to pray with Peter and John: *“And now, Lord . . . grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.”*

Shall we pray that prayer for boldness, you and me? Dare we pray this prayer for boldness, you and me? Will we, like Peter and John and the early church, open up ourselves to becoming, to being made by the power of the Holy Spirit, into those who are living boldly for Jesus? Those whose lives are readily apparent to the world around as being, indeed, boldly Christian? Jesus is only waiting for us to say “yes.”

¹ Acts 3:1-26.

² Acts 3:19-20.

³ Luke 12:11-12.

⁴ Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 291.

⁵ John 8:32.

⁶ John 14:6.