

In God's Sight, Acts 4:1-20

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Introduction

Today's text continues a story begun in chapter 3. A disabled person who had received alms from passers-by was healed in the name of Jesus. This gathered a crowd, and Peter preached again in Jerusalem. Chapter four picks up with the reaction of the Temple leadership. They don't like the sermon, but they won't do anything in public because of the crowds. This is how they had behaved a few weeks earlier when they arrested Jesus in the middle of the night with the help of a traitor. For now, the apostles are safe despite the leaders being unhappy with them. They will not always be safe. Within a few chapters the first martyrs will be made by those who are determined to resist and oppose the gospel.

Peter and John say to the temple leaders: **Judge for yourselves whether it is better in God's sight to obey you rather than God.** They did these things in the sight of God, and what they did made God visible in the sight of the people: They showed the kindness of God who cares for and saves the sick and the sinner; despite an apparent lack of education they proved the soundness of their doctrine; and they presented their faith with boldness, not exactly unafraid of the threats but knowing that it is better to fear God even more.

Let us pray. Dear God, help us to live faithfully in your sight, and present you before the world in the grace, the power, and the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Kindness

The Apostle Peter states that the reason he and John are being interrogated may be for an act of kindness shown to a person with disabilities. In chapter 3 verse 6, when the disabled

person first sought alms as Peter and John walked by, the apostles replied, *“We don’t have money, but what we do have we will share. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”*

They might have said, “We don’t have any cash, but we’ll carry you back to our own church and you will be taken care of.” That seems to be the strategy of the Church around the world today, to take care of people in need without speaking power into them for their healing in Jesus’ name. In Kane County and around the world Christians make a huge witness to kindness with nursing care and food pantries and other things, all leveraged by silver and gold.

Today’s text makes me wonder: Is Christian money pushing God out of Christian ministry? Most churches today surely do not feel wealthy. But the wider, deeper issue remains, that justice and redemption in the Church are steered by finances rather than by the Spirit, and then we wonder why the Spirit is not more present among us. We pray for revival, and then we declare our tithes and offerings on our tax returns, because our left hand wants to know exactly what our right hand is doing.

Observant Jews in those days, in fact most religions up to the present, want followers to give “alms” to the poor, the spare change kind of mercy that goes into the Benevolence Offering we collect every second Sunday of the month. Alms make a difference for a day. Redemption in terms of learning skills or being tutored makes a difference for a lifetime. The Word of salvation in the name of Jesus makes a difference for eternity.

One of the things that we are wrestling with in leadership is whether God is calling Elgin Covenant to move beyond the kindness of the Donut Klub, and open ourselves up to kids in need of redemption and salvation, messy as that is: kids who need tutors or mentors or counselors. One ministry in our area that has gone way beyond alms to redemption and salvation, is Fox Valley Christian Action, which runs the Riverwoods camp and the day-time ministries at various

housing projects. Perhaps it is time to partner with them, for our church is surrounded by need. At Larkin hundreds of kids come from families barely making it, kids who struggle with basic needs, including language barriers. Can we in our kindness start making room for the power of God to work among them? More than money can we offer redemption and salvation by investing time, and relationship, and speaking into lives in the name of Jesus for healing and wholeness?

In our Psalm and Gospel text we have met Jesus as the Good Shepherd, as one who saves the sheep. Imagine a sheep that is caught in the thicket, its wool tangled in thorns. To give alms is to ask the sheep if it is hungry, pull up some nice grass it can't reach, and feed the sheep, while it is still caught in the thicket, but the lunch the sheep has had from your hand is not rescuing it, it is not pulling it out of the thorns. The good shepherd will rescue the sheep by pulling it out; that is redemption and salvation. Do you see the difference?

2. Soundness

Beginning with the act of kindness, Peter goes on to explain what had occurred, a healing performed in the name of Jesus. He then summarizes for the leaders much of what he had preached in his first two sermons, that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is raised from the dead, and **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.**

The soundness of this doctrine is proven by the healing of the disabled man, and since this miracle was widely seen and attested the temple leaders could not refute either the miracle or the doctrine. In the thousands of years since Acts was written, there have been all kinds of efforts to subvert the soundness of this doctrine.

In verse 10, the name of power is “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” For a couple of hundred years there has been an attempt to try to separate the “Jesus of history” from the “Christ

of religion.” That whole approach is utter nonsense. The name of power is the name of Jesus, that very Jesus of Nazareth, fixed and placed in time and space, the Christ of God in human flesh walking the ground of Israel when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. Have you ever asked yourself why since ancient times the name of the Roman governor has been included in the Apostle’s Creed? Because it fixes the event in real time in real history, that is why. It is unsound doctrine to speak of Jesus as a myth and a fictitious character; history knows him. It is unsound doctrine to speak of Jesus as only a human person, another martyr among many.

The testimony about Jesus is that he is the Christ.

A second attempt to subvert sound doctrine, is that philosophers of the enlightenment cast doubt on miracles as a whole and on the resurrection in particular. The whole point of the author of Acts, who is also the author of the Gospel of Luke, is that these events were witnessed not by a handful, not by just a few, but by many, and could not be refuted. Peter declares to the leaders that it is Jesus Christ of Nazareth whom they crucified, **“but whom God raised from the dead.”** It is unsound doctrine to claim that a person can be faithful and reject the resurrection as an event in history. Without his resurrection and our hope to share in it ourselves, faith in Jesus Christ of Nazareth is worse than useless.

A third attempt to subvert sound doctrine, is this idea that faith in Jesus is just one of many authentic ways to know God and enter into whatever happiness God has in store for us after we die. Peter states in verse 12, **“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.”**

Peter stated that in the name of Jesus the man had been healed, and the healing in turn proved that the Name of Jesus was divine in power, and this two-fold testimony proved his statements about Jesus, his identity as Christ, and his resurrection, to be true. If Jesus of Nazareth

was neither Christ nor alive, his name would have done nothing for the disabled man. So the temple leaders have to distract themselves; they begin to fuss that Peter was standing before them like a teacher, but he lacked what they considered formal training. Here the NIV might be inexact in verse 13, “When they realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men.” I wonder if a better translation would have been “Perceiving that they were unschooled” or “Supposing that they were unschooled.” For Peter and John had been with Jesus for three years, and they were fresh off of 40 days of seeing Jesus alive and hearing him explain the scriptures to them in reference to himself. Peter was not only filled with the Spirit, he was also equipped in the Word, having been a full-time disciple of the Rabbi, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Training in the Word of Christ is essential, it is the power of the Spirit of Christ that establishes the soundness of our doctrine. The soundness of doctrine is unsound without the mission to the world that it drives, for sound doctrine is nothing other than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the only name under heaven by which we must be saved. If we are all doctrine and nothing about mission, our doctrine is unsound. If our mission is unfruitful in redeemed and saved lives, if the most our mission shows is the kindness of alms-giving, our mission is unsound for it is lacking the power of the Spirit.

3. Boldness

When Peter and John were warned not to speak anymore in the name of Jesus, Peter replied, **Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.**

There is a lot of boldness among evangelicals today. I would call it impersonal boldness. It is the boldness of a mega-church such as Moody Memorial or Willow Creek, where the pastors offer their sound doctrine but are several layers of leadership removed from the worshiper in the

pew. It is the boldness of the radio and of the internet, and of making many books, of which there is no end. Peter met the temple leaders in the eye, and he was surrounded by armed guards ready to do to him whatever the leaders said. Is that the kind of boldness that we find in ourselves? The wind of our society is turning chill against the church and against the scriptures; the world's pundits and politicians are urging us now, and perhaps sooner than we imagine will be trying to force us, to either tickle their ears or shut our mouths. Will our boldness remain?

Some of us think we want revival here and in our nation. Not many of us, apparently, I am asking for forty people to commit to meeting one evening a week for six weeks, and so far I have about twelve people who are interested. Nation-wide revival might stem the tide and return the church to a position of protection and favor in society. Or it might accelerate the conflict with the world and bring persecutions even more swiftly and more intensely. What I will say, not by a charismatic vision but as a student of history, is that with no revival, opposition to sound doctrine will increase. If we are thinking about our future as a congregation beyond this anniversary year, we need to start coming to terms now with the prospect that our church will not function like it has in the past, because such function will not be possible.

Either revival will change what we do and how we go about what we do, or the absence of revival will force us to constantly negotiate our position and ministry in an increasingly hostile world. One way or another, we need to give space to God to work; we need God's Spirit to make us bold.

Conclusion

Peter models for us the testimony we can make in God's sight, when we give space to the Spirit to fill our testimony with power. It is good to give alms, but faith calls us to a deeper investment than mere money. With faith in the name of Jesus, let us make room for God in a

ministry that brings redemption and salvation. It is good to be sound in doctrine, and our doctrine is the gospel which drives us into mission; let us make room for God in a mission that bears fruit and yields a harvest. It is good to be bold about our convictions on the air, in cyberspace, and at the ballot box –whatever that looks like to you; let us make room for God by being bold eye-to-eye, not only with neighbors, but with opponents who resist the gospel for themselves and would shut us up if they could.

Making room for God will stretch our faith. Perhaps it is Peter saying to us, as this text comes to us across thousands of years, “Elgin Covenant, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Perhaps it is we who by faith in that name will find our feet again, and if we have been lame, we will enter the sanctuary in the sight of God and the world, walking and leaping and praising God. Amen.