

“A Lesson in Boldness”

Reading: 1 John 3:16-24; Acts 4:1-14

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I was tempted to begin today's message by telling you a cringe worthy story from the news about Christians behaving badly. You know the sorts of stories I'm talking about: the ones where someone uses their faith as a pretext for doing something incredibly insensitive, clueless, or obnoxious. There are, I'm afraid, plenty of examples out there to choose from. It's certainly true that there are those in the media who work hard to make Christians look like rubes when there's really more to the story, but we do have to confess that there are also plenty of Christians who seem to work pretty hard to make Christians look like rubes. So I decided not to pick on any one story out of fear of misrepresenting a brother or sister in Christ.

And the reason we're starting here is because our focus for today is on Christian boldness. Our story from Scripture for today is one of a boldness that surprises those who hear it. But encouraging Christians to be bold is, paradoxically, something that makes me hesitate, mostly because of the aforementioned stories of Christians behaving badly in the public sphere. There are simply too many times when Christians have heard the good news of the truth of Christ and then somehow translated that truth into an entitlement mentality toward the rest of the world: I know the truth, so I therefore have the right to tell everyone else what to do. There are in fact segments of evangelical American Christianity that have developed entire political theories on this sort of thinking, and they make it their aim to get evangelical Christians in power in each of the various areas of influence in our culture, thereby basically forcing the rest of our culture to adhere to Christian morality. That's bold, yes, but in the wrong way: the gospel message relies on persuasion, witness, and sacrificial love, not on coercion.

But on the other end of the spectrum are those who insist that religion is a purely private matter. They're so afraid of confrontation and the risk of provoking offense in others that they would hardly claim being a Christian even if you asked them, to say nothing of actually taking the initiative in transforming the world in the name of Christ. The result is what we've seen far too many times: Christians and churches that have stripped the gospel of any power, reducing it to nothing more than a moral philosophy or a series of stories that can be interchanged with the morals and stories of any other set of beliefs. Somewhere in between the offensive bombast of one side and the inoffensive impotence of the other lies true Christian boldness.

In this season between Easter and Pentecost, we've been exploring what effects the work of Christ has in our lives. We've celebrated Easter, and Easter is the focal point of so much of what we do as Christians, so what does it really mean? The death and resurrection of Jesus allow for the forgiveness of sins and the conquering of death through resurrection, which gives us hope of knowing God. But what is there beyond forgiveness and hope? There must be more because of what we see happening among the followers of Jesus in the New Testament. They are profoundly changed, and they begin a powerful movement that spreads across the world and is continuing here and now with you and me and millions of other Christians. So what are some of the other effects of the work of Christ? We've seen that the message of Christ builds a community of His redeemed and worshipping people, and it launches Jesus' work of healing and redeeming into and among the church, and it gives meaning and direction to all those who are lost and directionless. But there is more.

There is a boldness that comes with being ambassadors of the rightful king. It's a surprising boldness, sometimes, and it's a challenging boldness if you're not sure of your mission, but there is true power in the name of Christ because God has proven Himself faithful.

The story picks up just after the passage we read a couple of weeks ago, in which Peter and John, two of the leaders of the Church, are on their way to the temple for a time of prayer when they encounter a lame beggar at the temple's entrance. In the name of Jesus, they heal the man, and in his joy the man makes quite a scene. Peter responds to the astonishment of the people in the crowd by telling them that this happened through the name of Jesus, the one who was recently crucified, probably by some of the same people in that crowd. It's proof that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and that the kingdom He promised has indeed arrived and is continuing even though He is ruling from God's throne room rather than an earthly one. He has, however, commissioned His ambassadors to continue the mission and the methods He began.

And these ambassadors go out in the boldness of commissioned ambassadors of the rightful king. Their actions in the temple get Peter and John arrested by the people in charge of the temple, who, again, were probably involved in the conspiracy against Jesus and surely aren't thrilled that His followers are now preaching that He's alive and ruling in spite of the supposed success of the conspiracy. Peter and John are jailed for the night and then hauled in front of the Sanhedrin, the body of religious and legal scholars that serves as the ruling authority for the Jews. The line of questioning goes pretty much as you would expect: they want to know "by what power or what name did you do this?" It's not the healing itself that is a problem; it's the possibility that they acted in the name of a convicted criminal who regularly preached against the Jewish leadership.

Peter gives them a short sermon, and he certainly does not refrain from pounding the pulpit and convicting his audience. He does not hold back from declaring plainly that this man was healed in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom *you people here*, you members of the Sanhedrin, wrongly convicted to death. You've put yourself on the wrong side of God's work, because God has accepted the one you have rejected, and His name, and His name alone, is the chosen name through which salvation comes. Keep in mind that as far as Peter and John know at this point, the Sanhedrin might do exactly the same thing to them that they did to Jesus, but Peter doesn't even try to be diplomatic or to hedge his bets or to lessen the blow.

The response of the leaders is fascinating: "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say." This courage, this boldness, is enough to silence some of the most learned men in the nation.

But it's probably not just that these men are shocked by Peter's words, or that they're not quick enough to come up with a response. It's probably a little deeper than that. Their culture was quite different than ours, and one of the biggest differences was that society was very hierarchical and very concerned with maintaining your honor and avoiding shame. And so there were very specific rules about the sorts of people you were allowed to interact with and how you could interact with them in an honorable way. If you didn't follow those unspoken rules, you might bring shame on yourself. And in this episode we have a couple of "unschooled, ordinary men" standing before the

high priest and his family, as well as the most eminent scholars around. Normally, in that sort of setting you would remember your place; you certainly wouldn't challenge the authority of people so much higher up the social ladder than yourself. You would answer their questions respectfully and not step out of line at all, or else you might bring shame on yourself for dishonoring someone better than you. And normally, if that sort of thing happened, the high priest and the Sanhedrin would know what to do: again, there were socially-accepted ways of dealing with people who challenged your authority in a way that retained your own honor in the eyes of others.

But things are going a little haywire here. Peter isn't responding to them in a socially acceptable way, because he's not speaking to them like a country bumpkin fisherman ought to. Instead, he's speaking to them as though they were his social equals, which would normally be a very dishonorable thing for him to do. But the evidence for his claim — the man who had been lame but is now healed in Jesus' name — is standing right there, so the normal ways of responding to someone beneath you don't seem to be appropriate. The members of the Sanhedrin aren't sure what to do. They spend some time thinking about it and debating, but eventually they have to let Peter and John go free.

This sort of bold speech should be reserved for those who are on equal terms. These men who ought to have almost no social standing, who have no education or position or wealth, are standing before some of the most powerful men in the country and speaking to them as though they were their equals. This is not pride, it's not stupidity, and it's not ignorance. It's boldness. It's the boldness that comes with being the ambassador of the King, the one who has lifted up the valleys and bought mountains low. They aren't disrespectful, but they have every right to speak to the high priest on equal terms, because their positions have been equalized by the work of Christ. They have the boldness of those sent by the King, because they rest not on their own abilities or rights, they rest on His authority, His power, and His commission. The Sanhedrin thought they were dealing with some rabble-rousers; they weren't expecting to receive ambassadors whose credentials are shown through a miraculously healed man.

In fact, this boldness is something that shows up all through the book of Acts. After Peter and John are released, they gather again with the church and pray, asking God to give them more boldness, and immediately afterward, the Holy Spirit shakes the place with His presence, and they go out, preaching boldly. Again and again, as the story of the church continues, we hear about the followers of Jesus preaching boldly wherever they go. Paul in particular, but also Barnabas, and Apollos, are bold preachers. Wherever they go, they are not afraid or constrained by the people or the situations they encounter. They go as ambassadors of Christ, carrying His authority.

Again, it's a boldness that has its source in God. In the book of Hebrews, we read about how we have the boldness to enter into the holy presence of God because of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. "Do not throw away your confidence" because of persecution or opposition, we read, because "it will be richly rewarded." We boldly trust in the power and faithfulness of our Lord, and He will not fail us. And if we can boldly go before the throne of God because of the work of Christ, we can boldly go into the nations of this world. Or in our reading from 1 John for today, we do not only preach love, we live it through our actions and in truth. And if we live that sort of love, God's Spirit witnesses to us that we live in God's love, and we have confidence before God.

And so the work of Christ gives us the boldness of those who live in the world as ambassadors of the coming King. We are on a royal mission to share the love and hope and forgiveness and redemption offered by Christ to the world. This is how we steer the middle course between being jerks for Jesus and keeping our faith only to ourselves: we have a mission from the King, and so we dare not keep silent or else we will fail in our mission. But at the same time, we are on *His* mission, not our own, and so we operate using His methods for His purposes and at His leading.

In recent years, the cry of our church has been that God would make us deep, beautiful, and fearless people. Here in our reading today, we see an example of Peter and John being fearless ambassadors of Christ. In their case, that boldness came in the form of speaking truth to those in power, in trusting in the word of Christ and the authority of Christ in the face of those who would silence their mission. But that boldness applies to many more situations than that. It may come in your life, when you may need to claim the boldness of an ambassador of Christ to set aside a habit or a way of thinking that is not holy. It may come in a relationship with someone else, when they are hurting or lost, and you have the true hope of Christ, if only you'll be bold and speak up. It may come on behalf of someone else, stepping outside of yourself and your comfort to engage with issues of justice or healing for those who are in need. How can you be a bold ambassador of Christ today?



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