

Acts 4:5–12; John 10:11–18

Grace to you, and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come.

Our first lesson tonight is actually a continuation of the reading that we had from last week. Hopefully, you remember that story, that Peter and John are going to the temple to pray. As they enter the temple at the gate called Beautiful, they pass a man who is sitting there begging. He had been born a cripple and that's what he does for his living. He sits there and begs from people as they enter the temple. He calls out to Peter and John for alms, but instead of giving him alms, Peter reaches out his hand and says to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk," which the man does. He stands up and is immediately able to walk. There is much rejoicing, excitement, and jumping around. Peter addresses the crowd that has naturally enough gathered around to view up close and personal this amazing event.

The words that Peter gives them are not exactly what one might expect. He says to the crowd: "You who rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and killed the Author of Life, whom God raised from the dead."

Surprisingly, the crowd reacts positively upon hearing Peter's message. It doesn't seem to be a problem to any of those who witnessed the event. It's not until the religious authorities show up – which is where our reading today picks up – that there is any kind of negative backlash.

The religious authorities are listed in the first couple of verses in chapter four of Acts. They are the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees. The Sadducees, very specifically, do not believe in the resurrection. They show up and they arrest Peter and John because here they are preaching about the resurrection of the dead. Even though after Peter and John preached about five thousand people came to believe in what they have to say, the religious authorities arrest them and put them in prison.

This is a rather important point in Christian history. It doesn't really say that in any of our scriptures. It's important because, even though we celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the Church – and in our reading Pentecost happened a couple weeks prior to this event – in our reading tonight this is the first time that this new "cult," the new believers, these converts to the following of Jesus of Nazareth – called the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God – this is the first time that this movement encounters resistance. And what happens with that resistance? The people who are proclaiming are thrown into jail.

Did you notice who puts them on trial? It was the same gang who just a few weeks previous had arrested Jesus and put him on trial: Annas, the high priest; Caiaphas; John, who is probably the son of Annas; and someone named Alexander who we don't ever hear anything else. The first two, Annas and Caiaphas, were among the ringleaders there at the Sanhedrin and the star chamber. They want to know "by what power and by what name did you do this?" Peter, filled with the Spirit (as happens many times throughout the book of Acts), gives witness to Jesus.

The after-story, the verses that immediately follow our reading, verses 13-21, give us these details. The religious bureaucrats realize that John and Peter are “ordinary and uneducated” men. Then they realize that these yahoos - for lack of a better word – in verse 13, they recognize them as companions of Jesus. It’s like a light bulb suddenly goes off for the religious authorities. They can’t bring Peter and John up on any charges because, first of all, good was done. They’ve got the crippled man standing right next to them as they are on trial and apparently he was such a fixture there at the temple that the religious leaders knew him, had seen his crippled legs, and so they couldn’t argue the fact that this was a faked healing. And they can’t bring them up on charges because, apparently, too many people know about this healing as well.

So, in verse 18, “They called Peter and John and warned them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But when 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.”

These two followers of Jesus, Peter and John, were living out their faith. I suppose you could argue, so were Annas and Caiaphas. But there’s a difference between the way Peter and John are living it and Annas and Caiaphas are living it. With Peter and John, some guy who is born disabled is made whole at age 40. With Annas and Caiaphas, they’re so afraid of something new and different, that they order those who are involved to stop doing it.

So I have to ask: Where are we in our faith? Where are you, where am I in my witness of my faith in Christ? I’m not chastising you, because I can tell you I ask myself that question quite often. Generally daily, often times even hourly; many times when I’m driving to and from work. While I’m at the mall watching people – “How am I living out my faith now?” When I’m out for a walk, looking at the garbage strewn along the road, how am I living out my Christian life? When I’m at hospitals visiting folks, and see people in waiting rooms that I don’t know, people who are depressed, people who are concerned. Do they see me in my religious authority clothes and wonder why I don’t comfort them? Am I a witness to my Christian faith?

In his book *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, Donald Miller talks about his friend Andrew. “Andrew,” he says, “feeds the homeless on Saturday mornings. He sets up a portable kitchen on a sidewalk and makes breakfast for people who live on the streets. He serves coffee to his homeless friends, and talks with them and sometimes prays with them. ‘All great Christian leaders are simple thinkers,’” concludes Miller. “They actually believe that when Jesus says, ‘feed the poor’ he means you should do this directly. Andrew is the one who taught me that what I believe is not what I say I believe; what I believe is what I do.”

Andrew, like Peter and John. put his faith into action.

This strikes me as much the same boldness as Peter and John standing up before the religious authorities. So often, throughout the book of Acts, and throughout the New Testament in general, or even throughout the history of Christianity, believers were jailed, persecuted, and killed all because of this faith that they proclaimed in some guy from Nazareth who said we should treat one another with the same love and respect that we, ourselves, want to be treated, and that, by the way, God loves you no matter what.

Too many times I've run into people who claim they've been persecuted because of their faith. They can't say prayers in school, they are rejected for wearing a "Jesus Loves You" tee shirt. If you've got to wear a tee shirt or have a bumper sticker on your car for other people to know you're a Christian, I really have to wonder if we're living in a way that people would know that we are Christians.

Last week in the confirmation class, we talked about the difference between the Theology of the Cross, and the Theology of Glory. The Theology of the Cross is what Peter and John preached: that Jesus was crucified, that he died for me and for you and for our sins; that God loves us, always, no matter what we've done; that God promises to be with us no matter whether we're rich or poor, whether we're healthy or sick, whether we're working or unemployed, regardless of where we call home. God is there, in the ditch, right beside us. The Theology of Glory says: God wants you to be wealthy; God wants you to live in a big house and drive a big car; and if you do everything in the Bible (and more often than not what the television preacher) tells you to do, then God will reward you. If you get sick, you're not faithful enough. If you lose your job it's because God is punishing you for some kind of sin. If you're not living at the economic status that you want to, well, then your faith isn't what it should be.

The Theology of Glory is not the gospel of the Christ who died on the cross. The Theology of Glory is not the gospel that Peter and John preached. It's not the gospel that Peter and John went to jail for, or in Peter's case, was eventually martyred for.

To be witnesses of Christ, in the manner that Peter and John were, means that we live that life every day, no matter where we are and no matter what it might cost us. Christ never tells us that it's going to be easy. Peter and John can testify to that. But it's the right way to live. It's what we are called to do because of what Christ has done for us.

Amen.

