

February 11, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
Together In Faith # 6: Bold Over And Over
Acts 4:13-31; 1-12
Dr. David Renwick

Week by week in worship, we remember the essentials of faith in the words of *The Apostles' Creed*, and declare our belief in the "Holy Catholic Church."

"Catholic" here doesn't mean the Roman Catholic Church, though that's included. But it means "universal" (catholic with a small "c"): the "universal church of Jesus Christ." This is an affirmation of our God-given connection to other Christians across the globe, in every place and time, including Christians at the beginning: in the very first church.

In our sermons through the winter, we're thinking together about, and connecting with, the life of the early Christian church: the life of the first followers of Jesus after his life, death and resurrection.

And we're doing so with the help of the book from which we've just read, *The Acts of the Apostles*: a wonderful book given to us by God to remind us of the first twenty years or so of the early Christian church, and to bring us back to our roots as a church. We turn back to them to discover and rediscover the same guiding principles that made them so powerful and effective and transformational in their world – so that we can be powerful, and effective, and transformational in ours!

Today, we come to the 4th chapter of Acts which tells us of the first incident, out of at least a dozen, in which those followers of Jesus, setting out to be faithful to him meet with trouble, and opposition, and violence and persecution, and imprisonment. In fact, this incident in Acts 4 is the first of many in which they come to realize that following Jesus is never going to be easy.

Let me put it like this: when you read through *The Acts of the Apostles*, incidents of trouble and persecution for Jesus' followers appear not only in our chapter, but in chapters 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 21! That's twelve out of twenty four chapters: 50% of the book! Which is to say that when you become a follower of Jesus Christ, there is no assurance whatsoever from the first church that you get a free pass from trouble. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case: in one way, shape or form, it's coming our way! That's the message!

- It's going to be difficult. It is not going to be easy.
- There's going to be opposition; questions, doubts, fears.
- Sometimes – day after day
- Sometimes – year after year

And so what you would think is that people would think twice about joining this movement, about joining a community that experienced such opposition and suffering. And some certainly did: they stayed away! But not everyone!

In fact, right at the beginning of our passage (in Ch. 4:v.3), we're told that the church has been growing in numbers. There are now about 5000 men who are members of this fledgling group.

So, within a few months of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the church has grown rapidly

from an intimate group of twelve (Luke 6:12), and a broader group of 70 (see Luke 8:1-3, 10:1-8), and then 120 (see Acts 1:15), we now have 5000 men, which means, all told, that with women and children, there may be about 10,000! 10,000 who have begun to give their allegiance to this Jesus and who know that they'll still face these troubles and difficulties, and still they're saying: "Count me in! We want to join the gang"

Which, of course, begs the question "WHY"?

- Why would they join in – if this kind of trouble was coming down the pike?
- And how could they be sustained in such troubles, with such a visible energy and passion for life as we see in Acts, so that within a few more years after that many, many more would join the movement throughout the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world, all the way to the great city of Rome?

Why did they keep on joining? And how were they refreshed even as they experienced waves of trouble and opposition? That's our Question Today!

In fact, I have no doubt that some of you here today, feel right now as if you've been bowled over and over by waves of trouble and difficulty, and you're finding yourselves down – and seemingly out – and there seems to be very little energy to pick yourself up again, to keep following on Christ's path with any kind of enthusiasm. And my hope and prayer is that some of these principles and some of their practices will be as valuable to you as they were to them.

SO in those early years, WHY did people keep joining the church? And HOW were they sustained when the going got tough?

Well, as we look at Acts 4, there are at least three answers that emerge: answers that not only help people facing persecution and opposition, but ones that have given strength to Christians throughout the years, facing troubles and difficulties of any kind.

1. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS:

What we find, in the first place is an answer that I've given repeatedly in the series so far. There's one word which is dominant through the early chapters of Acts, and indeed through the whole book. That word is **RESURRECTION: the powerful, personal – but not private – experience of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus.**

Resurrection – seeing Jesus dead and then seeing him alive again, wasn't just something they hoped in or wished for; for them it was not just something metaphorical or spiritual, so that when the going got tough they might change their minds and say "Well, perhaps we were wrong or mistaken! We'll drop it! Let's think of another way of expressing our spirituality!"

NO! – Resurrection was fundamental, and was a permanent source of life-changing power for them.

So if we go back to our story in Acts 4, what we find is that when the followers of Jesus are arrested, and the authorities tell them, "You've got to stop preaching this resurrection business," they don't say, "OK! We won't do it anymore!" BUT they say "NO! we CANNOT STOP!" which is quite different! In Acts 4:20 this is exactly what Peter says: "WE CANNOT keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

“CANNOT”! (in Greek this is the word from which we get our English word “dynamite.” In other words, Peter says “we don’t have the power to stop!

“Resurrection” to them was non-negotiable; because it was something they’d seen and heard – together!

Sometimes we forget that back in the ancient world, not everybody believed in resurrection. Sometimes we assume that back then, everyone was superstitious, and believing was easy. But this is not true:

The group of Jews known as the “Sadducees” (mentioned in Acts 4:1 – they were the group in power in Jerusalem) believed, like many do today, that this life was all there was and that any talk of an after-life, of resurrection, was wishful thinking. In fact, they were the ones who threatened the Christians and imprisoned them to get them to face up to “modern reality” and change their minds – but all to no avail.

“We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard (said Peter).

In other words, *“We saw him! We heard him! Not just internally! Not just spiritually! Not just when we were all alone! But together we had an experience that we shared – and cannot deny, even if we wanted to!”*

And this POWERFUL, IRREFUTABLE, SHARED EXPERIENCE was fundamental to their energy and staying power.

I don’t know if you’ve ever had a deeply personal-but-shared experience like that; one that gave you power when the going got tough. Let me share with you one in my life.

It was at the end of my ministry in my first church in Labrador in Canada. Currie and I were leaving after 5 years there, to pursue doctoral studies in Richmond, Virginia, and the small congregation was holding a farewell party.

In the Church Hall that night, we experienced much laughter and a powerful sense of joy – but more than that, a sense of healing and holiness and GOD’ PRESENCE!

The 5 years had been pretty tough. At the beginning, when we had agreed to go, we’d been told by the home mission board in Toronto that if we did not accept the assignment, then the church would be closed! They’d had 5 ministers in 5 years. And the previous minister’s wife had had a nervous breakdown!

So we agreed to go for TWO years; and here we were, FIVE years down the road at this party – with this powerful sense of God’s presence, and a joy that pointed to God’s healing of this church!

And then it was over. We left. We headed south. But in the months that followed, we couldn’t get the evening out of our minds.

And then something else happened: I was having a conversation with the minister who followed me. And he asked me out of the blue: “What happened on that night?” He said other people in the church were still talking about this simple farewell party that was somehow different from anything they’d ever experienced!

And at that moment I knew that our experience wasn’t just in our heads, but had been shared by others! In fact, with many others in the room! And from that day to this, because of that

deeply personal but shared experience I have never doubted – no matter how many obstacles in the way – that God’s passion is to revive and renew and build, not just our lives, BUT His family, the church!

AND the disciples had the same kind of experience with the resurrection. Even though they were told to stop speaking about it, they couldn’t! And this profound faith, based on a shared experience, empowered and sustained them, and gave them a joy and confidence that brought many others into the household of faith, too.

2. COMPANIONS OF JESUS

And not only that, BUT empowered and sustained by the resurrection, the early church was ALSO empowered and sustained by the times and occasions they had spent with this Jesus: both after his death and resurrection, and before.

Acts 4.13 tells us that when the authorities were confronted by the boldness and confidence of Peter and his fellow disciple, John, and when they realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men (the word in Greek for “ordinary” is actually “idiotes,” from which we get our English word “idiot!”), the only explanation that they could come up with – was that THEY HAD BEEN COMPANIONS OF JESUS!

What a wonderful statement. *I wonder if other people can recognize us – by looking at us, watching us, hearing us – that we have been and are companions of Jesus.* They had spent time with him and, like time spent anywhere and with anyone, it had rubbed off.

- You spend 4 years at any college and it impacts the rest of your life.
- You go to law school for 3 years and you begin to think like a lawyer.
- You spend 4 years in the military and there are ways of doing things that will probably be with you from that moment on, even though you’ve been out of the military for years.

So too with the first Christians. The first disciples had spent at least three years with Jesus – day after day, week after week, month after month – and his character and friendship rubbed off, transforming and strengthening them for the tough road they were on.

In fact, one reason they wrote down his stories in what are now our 4 gospels is so we can be his companions too! Spending time with him too!

SO READ THE GOSPELS! Open the book and read – day after day

- until your life somehow becomes wrapped up in his!
- and His life, his love, his courage, his boldness becomes wrapped up in yours.

It won’t happen if he’s only on the periphery. It won’t happen if the book stays closed. But if we become his companions, and allow him to become ours, then, like being immersed in a new culture – we’ll learn his language: his pattern of life will become ours, and his life and friendship will sustain us, in fair weather or foul, so that when we are bowled over again and again by whatever life brings our way, he’ll give us the boldness and energy that we need to lift ourselves up, and run life’s journey to the very end.

The authorities could see it in Peter and John. They recognized that they had been companions of Jesus, and were empowered and sustained not only by their belief in the resurrection, but also by this transformative relationship.

3. COMMUNITY WITH FELLOW BELIEVERS

And then – in the third place, the third thing that sustained them in difficult times was their friendship, not just with Jesus, but with one another: they lived out their lives in close contact with other Christians.

So the first Christians are threatened; they're thrown into prison: bumped and bruised and then they're released – and what we read is that immediately after they are released, they return to be with their friends, and their friends energize them in a powerful way. In Acts 4: 23-24 we read

After they were released, they went back to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God.

I don't know if you've read or seen any of the studies done on the power of friendship in recent years. In 2008, one of those studies was conducted by the University of Virginia. Researchers took thirty-four students up a steep hill. They put big backpacks on their backs, weighted down, and then they made those students look down over brow of the hill. They didn't tell them what was going to happen next. Of course, the students surmised that they were going to have to go down this steep, fearful hill. But they weren't actually asked to do that. Instead, there at the top of the hill, they were asked to determine on some kind of a scale "how steep and fearful the hill was." And the researchers watched.

- Some of them made their decisions by themselves.
- Others formed groups to reach their conclusions together.

Consistently, those who formed groups assumed that if they had to go down the hill, they would be doing it together with others, and consequently they saw the hill as less steep, less fearful than those who stood and thought and answered alone.

In other words, the study showed what we already know: that "a problem shared is a problem halved." And if we have strong contacts and commitments to others, it's remarkable how we can be sustained when the obstacles rise and when the waves hit, and we are bowled over and over again.

Those disciples immediately after they have been threatened go back into the fellowship of the church, and into relationships which are meaningful to them, and instead of griping about what happened to them, instead of turning against God and blaming God, instead of asking God that their troubles go away (as I think I might have done), they prayed a simply remarkable prayer. They prayed like this (Acts 4:29-30):

"Now, Lord, look at their threats and grant to your servants 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."

Grant us boldness! That's all we ask! Give us what we need to be sustained to do your will and to fulfill your purpose no matter what happens to us. This is what we ask for.

"And when they had prayed (together!), the place in which they were gathered together was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness."

In other words – this was a prayer, prayed alongside friends, that God answered with a YES!

And we know it was a strong "YES" because they kept on going in the years ahead. Though the waves came rolling over them again and again, they kept picking themselves up by the power of

God, and bringing that message to the next generation. And from them, in time, God brought the message, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to us too.

The confident fear-decreasing power, the power to be bold, that comes

1. From of the Resurrection – an irrefutable shared experience
2. From the transformative power of the companionship of Jesus Christ,
3. And from the power of friendships within which we pray

Are these what empower you when the waves and winds hit?

May God help it to be so. May their prayer be ours, and may we find our lives and our church strengthened, in this wonderful way by God.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2017 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800