

CONFIDENCE BORNE OF PRAYER

Acts 4:13-31

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Preached September 24, 2006

Massanutten Presbyterian Church

I was starting to write this sermon when he walked in. “Are you a Christian?” he asked. “Yes, I am. How can I help you?”

Preachers among us know what it is like to be searching for that right illustration to begin your sermon. What is it that God wants to teach us through the text? Are there examples in our everyday lives that can drive the message home? I had just opened the Bible to read the Acts 4 text again when he walked in to my office.

Ben is a physician attending the Patch Adams workshop which has been meeting all week at Massanetta. You might recall the movie in which Robin Williams portrayed Patch, a physician, whose mission is to bring fun, friendship, and the joy of service back into health care. As I wrote this, Patch walked past my office window with clown pants, mismatched shoes, and his gray hair and mustache dyed turquoise blue. He was heading back to another session with the Gesundheit! Institute which he founded.

But Ben had a request. “Would you pray for me? I am a Christian and during this week I am surrounded by lots of folks who don’t embrace Christ. I guess you could say many are agnostics. I want to be faithful. I am trying to let the Holy Spirit guide me. But I want to be careful when I speak that I lift up Christ but do not turn people off.”

I told Ben about St. Francis of Assisi once saying, “Preach at all times and, when necessary, use words.” We talked briefly about translating the message of God’s kingdom into principles that the kingdom of this world can understand. I shared with him that he, no doubt, sees Jesus as the Great Physician whose healing was sensitive to the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. Such an emphasis makes sense to people who follow Patch Adams’ call to live lives dedicated to peace, justice, and care.

“You know what I’m talking about then,” Ben said. “I will be able to be stronger witness these final days because I know a brother is praying for me.” I took Ben’s hands and prayed for the Holy Spirit to gift him with listening ears and wisdom when he speaks. He left confident in God’s call for him to be a just and gentle witness for Christ.

In the text for today, Peter and John have been imprisoned for preaching Christ and healing in his name. In the beginning of Acts chapter 3, a lame man begs them for money. Their response has been put to music:

Silver and gold have I none, But such as I have give I thee,

In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Rise up and walk.

And he went walking, and leaping, and praising God,

Walking, and leaping, and praising God.

In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, Rise up and walk.

For over forty years, this man had been lame. For two generations of worshipers coming to the Jerusalem temple, this man, lying at the Beautiful Gate, was a mainstay. Everyone knew him, either personally or as the beggar with whom they tried not to make eye contact. And now, in the midst of the religious leaders, this man is walking, and leaping, and praising God. In fact, 5,000 persons have come to believe because of this event and the preaching of Peter and John.

“What are we to do?” Annas and Caiaphas and the whole high-priestly family are beside themselves. “Here we have uneducated, common men who are healing in the name of Jesus. What should we do?”

They choose to threaten Peter and John if they continue to speak in Jesus’ name. And the two disciples say, “You can choose for yourselves whether we should listen to God or to you. All we know is that we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

With one final threat, the two are released and rejoin their friends. When they finish telling what has happened, the group raises its voice as one to God and says, “Sovereign Lord, you are in charge. Whatever they did to Jesus was what your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. Now, in light of their threats, grant your servants to speak your word with all boldness.”

The Greek word translates as “courage, confidence, boldness, fearlessness.” One translation says, “Make us brave enough to speak your message.” Eugene Peterson’s translation says, “Give your servants fearless confidence in preaching your message.”

They pray for boldness, for brave hearts, for fearless confidence in the face of human threats. And, while they speak the message boldly, they ask God to stretch out God’s hand to heal in Jesus’ name.

What happens? The Jerusalem Bible says, “As they prayed, the house where they were assembled rocked; they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the word of God boldly.” Peterson says, “...with fearless confidence.”

Is that our experience? Are we persons whose confidence is borne of prayer, who find God strengthening us daily as we kneel in God’s presence?

The men’s prayer breakfast is one tangible way in which men in the church and community gather for fellowship and prayer, inviting God to fill us with fearless confidence. We have widowers whose tender tears have been strengthened by brothers standing with them in their grief. We have fathers whose parenting has been enriched by wisdom shared and prayers offered on their behalf. We have prayed prayers of thanksgiving, of relinquishment, of self-emptying, of tears. We have prayed prayers for transformation, for quiet, for peace, for healing, for sight. We have boldly prayed for the innocents whose lives are ravaged by war. We have prayed with fearless confidence for sisters and brothers whose lives are nearing their end and whose promise of eternal life is wonderfully secure. Through it all, we pray, as did Peter and John, for fearless confidence as we boldly proclaim Christ.

One writer said, “In a way, Christianity is the perennial counterculture because a life led in imitation of Jesus is bound to upset or challenge, explicitly or

implicitly, the status quo. Great Christians—St. Francis of Assisi, Thomas Merton, Albert Schweitzer—are often bold, albeit humble, Christians who make us feel uncomfortable; but they are also the ones who lead us to greater religious heights.”

In the introduction to The Theological Declaration of Barmen, one of our church’s confessions written in 1934, the stage is set on which the German Evangelical Church leaders acted. In January 1933, Hitler was named chancellor of Germany. He was able to persuade the Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. “As he consolidated his power, Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. He soon outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own ‘People’s Courts,’ initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and obtained the support of church leaders allied with or sympathetic to the German Christians.”

In late May, 1934, 198 representatives of Lutheran, Reformed, and United Churches, including theologian Karl Barth, gathered. With fearless confidence borne of prayer, they said, “Yes” to their faith in Jesus and “NO” to Hitler and the Third Reich. In the face of Hitler’s totalitarian rule, the confession states: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and death. We reject as false doctrine...still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.” That is fearless confidence, proclaiming the gospel message in a hostile world.

As I read the Barmen Declaration this week it was brought home because Laura and I had the privilege of taking my dad and mom and her father to the National World War II Memorial in Washington on Thursday. Both men, being Christians with fearless confidence borne of prayer, served our country in the war. It was a humbling experience to listen to them reminisce, remembering the unity of their cause and the pain of their losses.

A precious moment happened when I was taking a picture of the two at the Virginia memorial. A gentleman approached them out of the blue, extended his hand, and with tears in his eyes said, “Thank you. Thank you for your service to our country.” As the morning progressed, these two veterans were approached by numbers of others thanking them for their service which I knew to be fearless confidence borne of prayer and faith.

Confidence borne of prayer. Where do you see it? I see it every time we gather as a congregation to worship God. I saw it last week as Pastor John baptized Ava and the congregation promised to love and support her, and through our example, to help her know and follow Christ.

We see it when an eighth grader returns to her home church following a middle school conference and tells her pastor that she wants to speak on Sunday. No one knows what she is going to say. But her words are so powerful that the church sends Massanetta a tape. Listen to the confidence borne of prayer and faith. Listen to the bold proclamation of 14-year-old, Katharine,

speaking to her congregation. Imagine the joy in the hearts of Peter and John and Jesus as they see the Holy Spirit rock this 245-year-old church in Providence Forge, VA. Katharine described one event, the candlelight service at the lake. Listen.

“We lit candles as we stood in a huge circle. It was our final night. Just standing there with all the candles and everybody singing. You could hear a faint sound of a guitar off in the distance. It was just this really, really amazing experience.”

“I hear people say, ‘I felt the Holy Spirit,’ but I never really felt the Holy Spirit. But this time I went to Massanetta, I really felt the Holy Spirit. I felt so full and so fueled and just ready to do what God wanted me to do, no matter how simple it was. I just felt like, ‘Okay, God, I came here for a reason.’ And God really wanted me to do something, because I’ve never felt this way before. I feel so full, so plentiful. And I really, really, really love that feeling.”

“And I still have it right now, just talking about it. It just feels really, really good and I can’t stop smiling. No matter what happens to me, I hope I can look back to this experience and say, ‘In the darkest of times, God was there for me and He’s also there for me now.’”

“And I will always, always, always, always have God. He will always, always, always be with me. And ALWAYS is my word now. God is just gonna always be there for me and I know that. Now, when I worry about things, I just sit down and BREATHE ... and ask God to take the load off my shoulders and just be with me, to always let me know that He’s there.”

Confidence, fearless confidence allowing one to proclaim the good news with boldness. Peter and John had it and the Holy Spirit filled them and shook the church to life. Fearless confidence. Karl Barth had it. Bill Holbrook and Bob Wells have it. Katharine has it. Do we?