

Scripture Lesson: Acts 4:23-35

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 114

²³After Peter and John were released, they went to their own people and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, ²⁵it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the gentiles rage and the peoples imagine vain things? ²⁶The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' ²⁷"For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, ²⁸to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹When they had prayed, 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. ³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Acts 4:23-35

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Sermon Series, Part II: Love Boldly

Rev. Amy Terhune

Holly Young, in Elkhart, Indiana, has a story to tell. She talks about working from home doing freelance design, spending day in and day out by herself. And she remembers thinking, "I'm not really sure that this is what God has for me." A day came – she remembers it distinctly, when she bowed her head in prayer and said, "Lord, I'm listening if you have something else in mind." God tends to answer prayers like that, my friends. And a door opened – a door she never saw coming – but Holly had the courage to walk through it. And it was intimidating – the paperwork, the sounds of buzzers, and electronic door locks, and echoing hallways the very first time she entered the county jail. "Remove tattoos? I didn't even know anyone did that!" she laughs. But now, each day she goes through those series of gates and doors, through the metal detectors and the pat-downs and the security checkpoints, all to literally give someone else new skin – to burn away the remnants of a past life, a gang affiliation, symbols of a life that went down the wrong track.

Now please don't get me wrong. The days when tattoos automatically signaled a degenerate life are long gone. But like any other form of art, some tattoos can give strength while others can deplete it. Holly goes on to explain, "They've made mistakes, but I don't really want to know what those mistakes are. When I'm treating them, I hold the laser, and my healing partner holds the cooling wand, and I like that because then I can rest my other hand on their hand or on their shoulder, and I

just use that as an opportunity to pray for them. They're people, children of God. Most of them just couldn't get it together, and really, we're not much different." [story from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YhWT5jinhw>.] When I think about what it means to love boldly, Holly Young comes to my mind.

As we continue through our sermon series on the vision statement of the United Methodist Church – *The United Methodist Church forms disciples of Jesus Christ who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, love boldly, serve joyfully, and lead courageously in local communities and worldwide connections* – we explore this week what it means to love boldly. Given that theme, some of you may be surprised by our scripture lesson today. It mentions boldness, to be sure, but never uses the word “love” once. But it does include a prayer to preach the gospel with boldness. To preach the gospel is to preach the saving grace of Jesus Christ, who so loved the world that he died to cleanse our sin and rose to give us life everlasting. Jesus taught us that the greatest commandment was to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And on the night before he died for us, he gave his disciples a new commandment: that they love as he loves. By this, everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another. And the next day, he stretched out his arms on a cross. As they pounded nails through his wrists and the arches of his feet, he said, “Father forgive them – they don’t know what they’re doing.” In Jesus, love took on flesh. And after he had died and risen again, Jesus came to Peter – the disciple who had denied he even knew Jesus, not once, but three times – and he said, “Peter, do you love me?” And three times, Peter said “Yes, Lord, I love you.” And three times, Jesus said: “feed my sheep”. To follow Jesus is to live out one’s faith in love.

To put this lesson in context, Peter and John have been doing exactly what Jesus commanded: Feeding the sheep, not just with gifts to care for the poor, but with the story of redemption. They’ve been preaching Jesus – his love, his grace, his healing, his wholeness, his resurrection and life for all who follow. The Holy Spirit has swept through the followers of Jesus, and their numbers are growing daily, and that Holy Spirit has given the disciples boldness that eluded them before. This makes the powers-that-be anxious. The Sanhedrin, or the Jewish leadership, assumed that if they cut off the head, the body would die. That’s why they crucified Jesus. But the Risen Christ is even more powerful, and the body is growing, thriving as it’s head lives again. So the Sanhedrin arrest Peter and John and order them to be quiet. The whole scene is somewhat laughable, in that they can’t back up their threats with anything substantial. The people are mesmerized, so they don’t have popular support, and the Roman leadership seems to think they’ve been played, so the Sanhedrin has lost the trust of the regime. They don’t have a leg to stand on, and Peter knows it. “We cannot keep silent about what we’ve seen and heard”.

When was the last time you couldn’t keep silent about how you’ve seen and heard God at work? If you can’t think of the last time, then the call to love boldly is one we need to take to heart. Jesus had the audacity to command not only that we love one another, but that we love our neighbors, that we love those who persecute us, that we love our enemies. If you don’t believe me, feel free to check. It’s in Matthew 5:44, smack dab in the middle of Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. It’s neither hyperbole nor hypothetical. As Mark Twain famously said, “It’s not the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand.” And here’s one of those spots where Jesus is all too clear.

We know we’re called to love. Yet, for many of us, the question of how to love boldly remains. Dr Lisa Hancock, the director of worship arts for the United Methodist Church, voices those concerns: “Where do I start? Won’t I burn out? Just how bold is “boldly” anyway? What will happen if others don’t like it when I love boldly? What if loving boldly leaves me out on a limb all by myself?”

We're going to be interactive again this week. I want you to turn to a neighbor, preferably someone you don't know as well, and I want you to make sure everyone is included – don't leave anybody out on their own. You have two minutes to answer this question:

What holds you back from loving boldly? (allow 2 minutes)

Okay, let's hear some answers....

When we look together at this lesson for Acts, the first thing I notice is that they pray: "And 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." This is a prayer for strength. This is a prayer for change. This is a prayer for the movement of God's Spirit. These are not meager prayers to just get through another day. Now please don't get me wrong. Sometimes the best we can hope for is to get through another day. I went to visit a dear friend in psychological holding a few years back. Her prayer to get through the day when everything in her was screaming to give up was one of the most courageous prayers I've heard a person pray, and it moved me deeply. But understand this: if we come at prayer with the idea that it's God's customer service department and all we have to do is place an order and wait for its arrival, there's no power in that. Prayer is about relationship. It's about knowing God deep within. By all means, pray to get through the hard seasons. By all means, lift those you love in prayer – those in need, those suffering. But always be aware of the difference between wanting God to do something, and wanting God. Loving boldly begins with wanting God with all our heart, soul, mind, strength – letting God infuse our spirit with His Holy Spirit.

But notice what else our lesson says: Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.... This led them to share what they had. Whenever this passage comes up, there's always someone who points at it and "Aargh! Socialism! Communism!! BAD BAD BAD!!" No. It's dangerous to read one's own ideas, biases, or presuppositions *into* scripture. Always read scripture with an eye to what God wants you to get out of it – what the original author intended to say. I guarantee you, Peter, John, Paul – these apostles never heard of Karl Marx. They're like 1800 years apart. Don't go there. And anyway, socialism, communism – these are systems imposed on a population by the leadership. It's clear here that individuals touched by the Spirit respond of their own autonomy and volition to care for others. Because that's what we're about as Christians. The Spirit is empowering the church to be the church. It happens. It's still happening. You and I cannot fix everything, but when individuals in our church family have been in need, others have stepped up to help – to fix a car, or turn the heat back on, or replace a rotting floor or help offset expenses related to cancer treatments. It happens more often than you might think. If you want to get in on the good work, talk to me. I'll loop you in. Loving boldly happens in community.

But loving boldly is to be vulnerable – to take a risk. What that looks like varies from person to person, but we must at least acknowledge that we are called by Jesus to care deeply about what happens to other people. Maybe it's going into a jail. Maybe a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen. Maybe a rough part of town. Every year, I take our youth down to Cass UMC over MLK Jr. Weekend, and the most fearsome hour to me is the dinner hour, when we go in and eat with those at the shelter. But it doesn't bother the youth. They connect. They talk. They make friends and find neighbors in everyone. I learn from them every time, and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

Selfishness is not Christlike. I can't tell you how many times I've heard people tell me to feed myself, take care of myself, see to my own needs, because I won't be able to help anyone else if I don't.

An empty cup has nothing to give. And I get that. There's a pragmatism to that line of thinking that helps us set healthy boundaries. But Jesus doesn't talk in terms of me and mine or you and yours. He talks about us and ours. When are we going to understand that we are all connected, that humankind belongs to one another, and that all thrive when we think and act and understand ourselves to be we, us, together one? I don't know when humankind will learn to see beyond selfishness and greed, but I remain convicted with everything that is in me that understanding 'me' as part of 'we' is the difference between death and life. Loving boldly is life-giving. It changes us inside.

So I'm going to end with a question, and just like last week, I want you to turn and find someone else to talk to, preferable someone you don't know. Make sure everyone is included. Here's the question:

Where is God calling you to grow?

How is God calling us together to love boldly? (allow 3 minutes)

Okay, let's hear some more answers...

Let me close this morning with one final word. Loving boldly is not about numbers or statistics. Rev. Faith Fowler, down at Cass UMC, said something at Advocacy Day this year that stuck with me. She can quote numbers right left and sideways to you. I've shared them with you before. How many people fed, how many housed, how many transitioned out of homeless. The danger with that is that when the goal is the outcome you want to see, then people inevitably become projects. But when the goal is love, people remain people. We feed, we house, we work, we share, we give, we sweat, we toil, we paint, we pack backpacks, we refurbish a whole wing in the church, we welcome the PFLAG and Heart of the City and Musico and everyone else because we love. We love the whole city; we love the city whole. That's bold. We'll never be done.

"That is the hard truth of this part of the bishops' vision, there is risk here. We are called to love in a culture driven by fear. We are called to welcome in a moment of anxiety over difference. We are to embrace a multicultural representation of the kingdom of God that comes from every nation and containing every tribe and people, in a time of supremacy and domination. What adverb would you use other than boldly? This commanded love is not a reaction to situations or individuals. Instead, it is an act of will, a choice that we make about who we are and how we will live in our world day by day. We take our lead not from a culture or fear and suspicion, but from the Lord who commands us to love. We love because we choose to love. We love because we are empowered by the Spirit to Love, commanded by the Christ to love, created by God to love. We will love boldly." [from Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, in "Embracing an Adverbial Faith Worship Series, pg. 28; <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/miracle-sunday-worship-study-resources.>]

Amen.