



## **A Threat to Institutional Power**

**Acts 4:23-31**

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Why does the Church exist? Have you ever spent any time thinking about that question? ... Why does the Church exist?

I'm specifically *not* talking about the easy answer of, "because God created the Church." It's like telling a 3-year old that a baby comes from a mommy's belly. I mean, not really, but also, it's an answer that works – especially for a 3-year old. The Church doesn't exist simply because the Spirit gifted the Church into existence. Though, again, that is an acceptable answer for the question, "Why does the Church exist?"

No, when I ask the question, "Why does the Church exist?", what I really mean is, "For what reason does the Church exist?" What is our purpose? What is our goal? Why, of all the ways God could have decided to structure the people called God's own, did God give life to this creation we call 'the Church'?

In this season of Easter, we're utilizing the book of Acts to help answer this question. We're taking a look at the early Church, the Church comprised of those disciples of Jesus Christ in the first years after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, and we're asking, "how might we reclaim what it means to be the Church, today?"

Last Sunday, we learned from Peter's sermon in Acts 3 that the Church needs to be more intentional about redirecting to the one from whom our power comes. We need to decenter ourselves and give credit to Christ for the work of God in the world. The Church needs to reclaim the power of Christ in working toward the comprehensive restoration of the community, and everyone in the community. The Church needs to heed the call to repent for our own ignorance, and we need to be calling on the community at large to do the same.

Our story today in Acts 4 is a continuation from last week's story in Acts 3.

Peter and John had healed the lame man, and in response, people were asking how this could have happened. Peter began preaching to proclaim the power of Christ, and the necessity for everyone – every person within the Jewish community where he was preaching – to turn to the truth, that Christ is Lord.

Chapter 4 begins by saying, "While Peter and John were speaking to the people ..." They haven't even finished speaking yet when these next events occur. As they were speaking, the Jewish

leaders, annoyed at Peter and John's teaching that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead, had them arrested and put into custody for the night.

Did you catch that? The leaders of the temple – the Bishops, the District Superintendents, the Elders, the Deacons – they had a quick meeting while Peter and John were preaching, and they decided to have the two of them shut up by being put in jail for the night.

The leaders of the historic faith – the educated of the Temple – those who had spent the most time studying God's word – those whose livelihood rested upon the continuation of the Temple and its teaching – had these two men arrested, caged, locked away for the night so as to keep them from speaking any more.

The next day, these rulers – the very ones who had the two men arrested the night before – they brought Peter and John before the higher powers of the Jewish community: Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, all who were of the high-priestly family. These are the very men whom Jesus had come before not too long ago. These higher powers ran the jester's court that turned Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified.

This is no small deal for Peter and John; they could find themselves facing the same consequences Jesus had already faced.

Now, with Peter and John in front of them, the high-priests asked a single question, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"

What are they asking? Before we look at Peter's response, let's understand the question. They aren't asking about why Peter and John were preaching the name of Jesus. They weren't inquiring about the reason the other officials had them arrested, which is written in the text to be because of their speaking of Jesus as the one who would bring about the resurrection of the dead. No ... these high-priests are concerned about the power these men wield, which was used to make the lame man walk. "By what power, or by what name did you do this [miraculous act of healing]?"

In other words, if our God is the most powerful – if the God of Israel really is supreme – why were you able to do something none of our people had done in the past 40 years for this lame man? What power do you have that we don't have? By what name did you do such a miracle? Because in the past 40 years, no one has exemplified the kind of power you have shown in making this man walk. They weren't celebrating the man's healing, for them, the healing signified the presence of a greater power ... and they wanted to know the name that granted such power.

You can always tell when institutional powers are scared. When those who have historically held power find that someone, or something else, might wield more power, they want to know who it is and where they are: they want that power identified. Like Herod asking the Magi

where it was this King of the Jews was to be born, institutional powers don't take kindly to having their power usurped.

In response to this question, Peter, who we find is the designated preacher for the early Church in Acts, will be the one to respond.

In verse 8, we read, "Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Ruler of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed ..."

As Peter begins, he seems a bit dumbfounded. It's like he's saying, "If I'm hearing you correctly, if all you want to know is how it is this man was healed ... if that's your power trip .. if that's really your concern, to know the power by which this man was healed ... well, I'll tell you."

He continues, "Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead."

Can you even begin to imagine the response of Annas and Caiaphas, the two who had turned Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified, finding out that it was by the name of Jesus this lame man had been healed? It was by the power of the man they had sentenced to death that this man had been given life. And not just was it *in the name of* the man they had crucified, but that man, Jesus, had been raised from the dead?

Can you visualize how much they began to squirm in that moment?

In verse 13, the leaders decided to have a moment of privilege to decide what to do next. The text reads, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus."

This tells you something about what they thought of Jesus. When they noticed that these were uneducated and ordinary men – when they realized they were dealing with fishermen – when they saw these men for the ruffians they were – when they judged these men as being insignificant because of their place on the socio-economic ladder, they recognized them as companions of Jesus. Only after they acknowledged these men as commoners, did they associate them with Jesus, who they had killed without remorse, for he too was little more than a commoner to them.

Having made this recognition, they ordered the men to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another.

After a time of discussion, they called the men back, and "ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." Their response to the visible of Jesus' name offering healing in the

making of the lame man walk was to say, “no more.” Don’t utilize the name of Jesus again, in deed or thought. Peter and John said, “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” And the high priests threatened them again, but let them go, for they found no way to punish them because of the people, the greater community, who had all praised God for what had happened. They were fearful of what the populous might do should they sentence these men, for the populous was all abuzz, praising God for the miracle of healing that had happened.

It is not until they are released from the captivity of the Temple leaders that we get to today’s scripture, beginning in verse 23, where the two disciples were able to join their friends.

They told the story of what had happened, they gave a testimony of the events of the past 24-hours. They shared the news of how the man had been healed, and how they had been arrested and brought to trial for the healing of the lame man.

And they make it clear the powers they are up against in proclaiming the authority of the name of Jesus Christ. In verse 27 we read, “For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate (the Roman powers), with the Gentiles and peoples of Israel (all of the non-Roman powers), gathered against your holy servant Jesus.” To those in power at the Temple, these disciples speak heresy (claiming Jesus is the power of God); and to those in power in Rome, they speak sedition (claiming Jesus is the power, not Caesar).<sup>i</sup>

As this newly formed Church community gathered together to reflect and worship, as they gathered together in prayer and proclamation, they acknowledged that all of the other powers of the community saw Jesus as a threat. All of those who had long held the power of judge and jury, those who held the might of sword and chariot, those who maintained the ability to arrest and release, had all conspired together to quell the proclamation of the power of Jesus’ name. And though these powers chose to release Peter and John, they gave this ultimatum on their way out the door, “You must not speak of or teach in the name of Jesus.”

Their release was accompanied by a threat, because their proclaiming the name of Christ was seen as a threat. Their ability to leave was granted under the requirement of their silence.

Like a forced non-disclosure, confidential, or secrecy agreement, the powers of the community thought they could shut the disciples up with a court-mandated constraint.

And here, my friends, I think we find an invitation to reclaim our call as the Church today. The power of Christ, the work of the Church, is inextricably linked to being a threat to societal powers – whether political or institutional. The central power of Christ is a threat to any individual who seeks wealth and power for themselves, especially at the expense of others. The promise of God in Christ that gifts to every one of God’s created life, talent, ability, capacity, personhood, and the imago Dei ... it is inherently a threat to any who claim power over others because of social stigmas and cultural norms.

The disciples prayed to God, saying, “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.” The disciples prayed to God for boldness, that they might stand up to the threats of worldly empires – both religious and political. “There will always be threats because they are the central currency of this world. Threats reflect the anxieties of the powers and principalities having migrated in the hearts of those who believe that they must control religious and political movements, rendering them innocuous or exploitable.”<sup>ii</sup>

Church, I think we need to reclaim this prayer for boldness. We need to stop shying away from engaging in the hard, but necessary conversations that call for change both in the church polity and the political systems and structures that still marginalize some for the wealth and power of others. We need to proclaim the power of Jesus’ name to give life to the broken, health to the lame, comfort to the grieving, and peace to the whole of community.

For the reality is, the power of Christ will *never* make the powers of this world happy. The promise of God in Jesus that declares new life for *everyone* will always incite the threats of those who rather certain subsets to remain silent. There are some who benefit from the maintenance of oppressive ways, and they will never be ok with other powers stepping in to reform or defund the systems and structures that have marginalization in the very fibers of their framework.

And yet, this is the good news – this is the power we proclaim – this is the promise of God in Jesus Christ – that new life is offered for everyone. Jesus’ resurrection claims the promise of God’s love for all people. The Easter promise says the powers of this world carry no weight against God’s eternal gift. So let us claim the boldness of the church in proclaiming the promise of God in Jesus Christ, even if it means upsetting the powers of this world. Amen, and amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Willie James Jennings. *Acts: Belief, A Theological Commentary On The Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*