

Last Sunday, we heard the story from *Acts 3* of Peter and John being used by God to heal a man who had been lame from birth. The miraculous healing in the name of Jesus and the transformation in the man led to great amazement and astonishment among the people. In response, Peter preached a sermon to the gathering crowd about God sending Jesus who, though full of grace **and truth**, was rejected by the people he came to save. Christ suffered and died so that anyone who put their trust and faith in him and turned from their sins could be forgiven and transformed. Today's passage from *Acts 4* picks up where we left off. Peter and John are still speaking to the interested and eager crowd. Listen to *Acts 4:1-22*.

“While Peter and John were speaking to the people, **the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees** came to them, **much annoyed** because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. **So they arrested them and put them in custody** until the next day, for it was already evening. But **many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand**.

The next day **their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family**. When they had made **the prisoners** stand in their midst, they inquired, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’ **Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit**, said to them, ‘**Rulers 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, 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. This Jesus is “the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.” There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’

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. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, ‘What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, **let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.**’ **So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus**. But 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. For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.”

I prayerfully pick the scriptures that will be our focus in worship several months in advance as was the case with this series on *Acts* that is running from May until Labor Day weekend. However, sometimes what I initially feel led to share about changes as I pray, study and listen

to the Spirit. My initial sermon title for today was The Transforming Friendship, but the more time I spent with this passage, what I kept hearing from the Spirit was Peter **Speaking Truth to Power**.

The struggle of truth versus power is one of the constant themes throughout the Bible.

Those in power often seek to convince others that what they say is the truth or God's will when frequently it is not. The Bible teaches us that truth and power more often are in a state of competition than cooperation. In the Bible, there are many stories of abusive, oppressive, violent power. The representatives of power in the scriptures range from Pharaoh of Egypt to rulers of Babylon like Nebuchadnezzar to Pilate and Caesar of the Roman Empire, but they're all the same in how they operate. Standing up to those in power are people like Moses, Esther, Daniel, an unnamed Syrian woman, Jesus, and Peter. Those in power desire to strengthen and protect their position and interests while increasing their wealth. They're ruthless about silencing, condemning and even killing those who would oppose them. Anyone with a modest knowledge of the Bible or of history knows this to be true. On the other side of power there's truth. Truth often appears to be small, weak and of no account. In the Bible and throughout history, truth is often spoken from below by shepherds, farmers, fishermen, the poor, outsiders, nobodies, foreigners, women, slaves, and refugees. There are 17 books of the prophets in the Old Testament and every single one of them is the witness of God's prophet speaking truth to power whether that power was a foreign government, the rulers of Israel or Judah, or even the religious leaders of their own people.

There are so many examples of the battle of truth versus power in the Bible. One of the strongest and starkest is found in the book of the prophet *Amos 7:10-17*.

“Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; **the land is not able to bear all his words**. For thus Amos has said, “Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.” And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, **for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.**’

Then Amos answered Amaziah, ‘**I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.”**’ Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, “Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.” Therefore thus says the LORD: “Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.””

Amaziah is a priest of the king, and he says that Bethel is “**the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.**” Notice he doesn't say it's a sanctuary of God and a temple of the Holy One. No, it's something else; something less. Amaziah is in the place of power, and like so many before and after him, he is a religious leader who has sold any integrity and honor he might once have had to be close to power, and sacrificed the truth and God's Spirit.

Peter stands in the tradition of Amos. Amos describes his background to the priest, Amaziah this way: “**I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of**

sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" In a similar way, Peter could say to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, **"I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a fisherman, and the LORD took me from following the fish, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, be my witness to my people Israel and make disciples in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'"**

Let's look more closely at the conflict between truth and power in *Acts 4*. "While Peter and John were speaking to the people, **the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees** came to them, **much annoyed** because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. **So they arrested them and put them in custody.**" With the people getting stirred up by the healing of the lame man, and apostle's teaching about Jesus and the resurrection, it doesn't take long for those in power to swing into action to protect their interests. The establishment responds to unsettling new ideas and perceived trouble makers in the conventional establishment way—they arrest Peter and John and lock them up. They need to act quickly because 3,000 people responded to Peter's invitation on Pentecost, and another 5,000 this day, and the Jesus movement is quickly growing and gaining momentum. On one side are the rulers, elders and scribes of the capital city—those who were born to power and wealth and the high-priestly family. On the other side are Peter and John who Luke notes are uneducated, common men (*Acts 4:13*). Verse 13 says (New Living Translation), "The members of the council were amazed when they saw **the boldness** of Peter and John, for they could see that **they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.**" Those in power interrogate Peter and John asking the question that rulers usually ask those who disturb the peace, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Who gave you the authority or permission to do this? Those in power are threatened by others who exercise power they don't know or expect; especially from those who are common, ordinary people and not part of the wealthy or powerful.

What enables Peter to speak truth to power? He spent significant time with Jesus. Peter was called a friend of Jesus and knew what Christ taught. One of the goals of a Christian is for people to recognize we have been with Jesus. What a great way to be known, as someone who has been with Jesus. In his book, *The Transforming Friendship*, Leslie Weatherhead writes about the transformation that takes place in the lives of those who truly become friends of Jesus. "In all who come near Jesus manners soften, hearts become gentle. There is new tenderness, a new sympathy, a new joy, a kind of infectious goodness. The disciples begin to say things, do things, and be things, which they never could have said, done, or been before. But those friends who have watched the change know the secret. They have been with Jesus. The friendship has done it. Friendship will always do that for us. It will make us like the friend we admire and see much of."¹ If that process isn't happening and evident in someone, it's more than fair to question whether a person truly knows Jesus at all because we can't know and spend time with Jesus without being changed.

Peter and John were companions of Jesus and they had the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John have been dragged before the authorities like common criminals because they're guilty of the heinous crime of (*Acts 4:9*) **"a good deed done to someone who was sick."** Peter tells his accusers the stone the builders of the nation rejected as unworthy has become the cornerstone of hope for the future (*Acts 4:11*). Now those in power have a real problem on

¹ Leslie Weatherhead, *The Transforming Friendship*, (Abingdon, Nashville, 1990). Page 34.

their hands. They're backed into a corner. A miraculous healing has occurred. If they come down too harshly on Peter and John, there could be trouble among the people, and the establishment has to appear to exist for the benefit of the people in order to protect their privileged position.

So, those in power take what is usually the first step by any authoritarian leadership—they order Peter and John to keep quiet. Controlling access to information, suppression of criticism, controlling or discrediting the press and media, banning books – these are the actions of the powerful to retain power. Unfortunately for the rulers, trying to keep spirit-filled apostles from obeying God and speaking of what they've seen and heard is like trying to stop a breaking wave.

For the moment, all the authorities are able to do is to threaten Peter and John and to release them. Even as Jesus moved toward a collision with those in positions of religious and political power so now do his followers. Just as those in authority tried and failed to stop Jesus from teaching and preaching; now they're trying and failing to silence Peter and John. Everything that happened first to Jesus is now beginning to happen to the disciples. After warning them and threatening them, Peter and John are released. Peter speaks truth to power when he says with courage and conviction **“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.”**

Peter spoke to the crowd, and 5,000 people were saved and changed. Sadly, when he gave a similar testimony to the rulers and those in power, no one believed him, no one repented or admitted their sin, and Peter and John were threatened and released, for now.

The struggle between truth and power is an ancient one that is still being waged today. Christians need to practice great discernment to make sure that we're following and standing for the values and teaching of Christ that we see in the Sermon on the Mount and in his many parables of the kingdom where so many times Jesus concludes by warning us that (*Matthew 20:16*) “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Reading so many Bible passages about truth and power this week, I want to leave you with one more from the prophet *Zechariah 7:8-14*, which contains a strong and clear statement of what the Lord tells us to do if we're going to claim to belong to God, and a dire warning about what will happen if God's people fail to do the Lord's will. Regretfully, the people of Zechariah's time didn't listen and the disaster that Zechariah foretold took place.

“The word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear. They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts. Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the LORD of hosts, and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and a pleasant land was made desolate.”

We want to be disciples who do what the Lord of hosts commands us to do; we want to listen, be open to the Spirit, and to have receptive hearts. In the final book of the Bible, John is sharing the words of the risen Christ and the ultimate triumph of the love and truth of God and in *Revelation 2:7*, our Lord says, **“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”**

Blessing: "Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord" (*Jeremiah 9:23-24*).

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. Can you identify a friend who has had a significant role in your life? What was it about your relationship that was so influential or impactful? How did knowing your friend shape you or change you?
2. Are there any Bible stories of speaking truth to power that you remember or are favorites of yours?
3. What is your reaction to the type of boldness Peter and John displayed in today's passage?
4. If you were to suddenly become "bold" for Christ, what about you would change?
5. Why do you think the authorities arrest Peter and John and order them to be silent? What are they afraid of or trying to prevent?
6. In response to a man being healed, some people repent and become a part of the Jesus movement, and others are defensive and angry? What does this suggest for our own life of discipleship?