

**Fourth Sunday of Easter:
Series Title: “Counter-Cultural Community”**

26 April 2015

FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011

“Fearing Rejection”

Preaching Text: Acts 4:5-12

In life we don't get what we want, we get in life what we are.
If we want more we have to be able to be more,
in order to be more you have to face rejection
(Farrah Gray).

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Previous to our story this morning, our text tells us that some of the religious authorities (the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees) were somewhat annoyed “because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” The next thing you know the religious authorities arrested Peter and John. They now awaited a hearing the next day before the religious authorities. The telling part of the story, however, is when Luke, as the writer of Acts, tells the reader “but many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.” May we hear the day's lesson from Acts 4:5-12:

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, 6 with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7 When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, 9 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, 10 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. 11 This Jesus is

‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;
it has become the cornerstone.’

12 There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:5-12).

Peter and John cause a lot of trouble according to Luke's story told in Acts 3:1-10. What is peculiar is that they did a good deed—the healing of a lame beggar in Jerusalem—and yet this act gets them tossed into jail. Later the religious authorities detain them for an explanation of this healing that they have prompted.

The beggar started this particular day as a beggar who sat outside the temple. By day's end he is now one who walks, dances, and indeed cavorts up and down the center aisle of the temple. He did all of this as he praised God for his good fortune (see: Acts 3:1-10).

Yet as odd as it sounds, this wondrous occasion does not produce joy and singing from the religious authorities, but rather draws a chorus of questions to those responsible for this apparent miracle—Peter and John.

From the start, the witnesses simply misunderstood the healing and therefore what had happened. All Peter had done was to call God's power into play by saying, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." But those watching presumed that it was Peter who prompted the miracle. In making this presumption the crowd went a bit further and became convinced that Peter and John were all powerful wonderworkers—almost god-like.

This reminds me of the story Luke tells after the shipwreck of Paul and his companions on the island of Malta. As it began to rain and was cold, the natives kindled a fire. Paul, being the helpful person he normally was, gathered a bundle of brushwood. As put the wood on the fire, a snake driven out by the heat, bit his hand. Instantly those who witnessed this snake bite naturally assumed God was punishing Paul for something or another. These witnesses said: "This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." So they began the countdown of his demise: 10, 9, 8

The natives expected Paul to drop over dead any moment. Yet when they saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god. People can be comical with our suppositions drawn from what we see and experience. Thus,

Peter assures the folks that neither he nor John is a miracle worker. Rather, Peter tells the stunned throng: “It wasn’t our power at all that caused this healing, but the power of God and the power of faith in the name of Jesus” (Acts 3:12-16).

And after making sure that neither Peter nor John got credit for the miraculous healing, Peter kept on preaching. He spoke about the resurrection, and believe it or not, that incited more grief and vexed the dickens out of the religious authorities. Before long these temple authorities had taken both Peter and John into custody (Acts 4:1-4). Not surprisingly, the next day the religious authorities called Peter and John and questioned these two (Acts 4:5-7). All this questioning and formal charging occurred simply because of what Peter suggests when he remarks: “because of a good deed done to someone who was sick.” Thus, no one seems happy about a crippled person’s healing—rather everyone seems disturbed because they do not understand and cannot explain this incredible healing by those two apostles described as merely “uneducated and ordinary.”

Why this hostile response for a good deed? The interrogators ask right from the start: “By what power . . . did you do this?” Ironically at the beginning of all this conflict the issues centered on a healing, the resurrection, and God’s mercy. Interestingly the issue is now turns into an issue of power. About power, Amy Tan once wrote: “You see what power is—holding someone else’s fear in your hand and showing it to them!” Yet because Peter and John had been through so much and trusted God—they had no fear. This is why when the cross-examiners asked, “Where do you get the power to do this? Who authorized you to do and say these things?” neither of the apostles cringed in their sandals one little bit.

We could say that there is a key aim as to why Luke introduces power into this story. Number one has to do with control. The religious authorities are turf-oriented and want to guard their particular brand of religion. We are no different. I urge a certain translation of the Bible and I often advise certain interpretations of mission and doctrine. Most of us are this way. But when our control is of more vital importance to us, rather than the well-being of another—a

handicapped person at the Gate Beautiful, for example—then our control is not grace but rather it's opposite. The Holy Spirit in Acts reminds us that no one can contain the Spirit of God. That divine Spirit will do good to whom and where God wills. This faith fact is true whether or not it violates our proprietary rules and structures of our religion.

To be sure Luke appreciates religious authority and structure as not necessarily bad. We might be tempted to read Acts as anti-institutional, encouraging an “I am spiritual, but not religious” point of view. Yet if we read Acts in this simplistic fashion, then we would be seriously misinterpreting Luke and his intention. If we read Luke-Acts in its narrative entirety, then we will see the whole text as pro-temple and pro-religious institution. Luke portrays early Christians as spending “much time together in the temple” (Acts 2:46), and in a revealing twist, Peter and John were in point of fact going to pray at the temple just prior to the healing (Acts 3:1). Also, the early Christians had a functioning organization, complete with Bible study, fellowship (koininia), common meals, prayer, economic responsibility toward one another, evangelism, and good dealings with the culture around them (Acts 2:41-47).

This powerful God represented by Peter and John cannot be controlled—even with the best intentions. Rather this God arrives among us not to destroy but to bring healing and salvation to us—God's people and creation.