



“With Great Boldness”

Acts 4:13–31; 2 Thessalonians 2:13–17 (NRSV)

Do we have the courage to act, to confront our own complacency, and to demonstrate to others the Good News of Jesus Christ? Can we be bold?

Spark Tank. A place where we can catch fire as we bring good news to those around us in all that we say and do. Love is a verb and the Spark Tank is all about living out that love in concrete ways. It really isn't all that different from the life of the first Christian fellowship in Jerusalem in the days and years after Jesus' death and resurrection. They prayed together and ate together. They shared the Lord's meal regularly and devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. And, as we saw last week, they looked outward. Not only was their testimony about Jesus proclaimed to all who would listen, Peter and John led them as they built for God's kingdom, enacting God's kingdom for those who were hurting and in need. When Peter and John encounter a crippled man, they pray to God for his healing and the man rises to take his first steps in many years. In all this, they were empowered by the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, who dwelt in them.

Confrontation

I suppose it was inevitable that the work of these Jesus-followers would draw the ire of the Jewish authorities. There was a reason they had engineered Jesus' crucifixion. After healing the cripple, Peter rose to speak to a crowd who had gathered in amazement. As he had done on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit arrived, Peter proclaimed the Good News, that God had accomplished in the crucified Christ what he had promised long before.

The response to Peter's preaching was astounding. Thousands of gathered people heard Peter's message and believed even as guards came to confront Peter. They seized both John and Peter and threw them into jail.

The next morning, the chief priests and scribes met to consider what to do with John and Peter. They couldn't very well deny the man's miraculous healing – thousands had witnessed it and too many knew the man was truly crippled. So, they asked Peter the sensible question: by what power did he do such a thing? Here's some of his response:

“It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. . . . Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

Whom you crucified . . . Luke tells us that when Peter was finished, all the gathered elites sat in stunned amazement – such courage and boldness from an uneducated fisherman from Galilee. They couldn't help but take note that both Peter and John had spent a lot of time with Jesus.

Next, the council had the men removed from the room and they discussed the best course of action. They decided to tell Peter and John never to speak of Jesus again...yeah, right...then and there, Peter tells them that he is not going to stop.

Imagine that you are among the believers anxiously waiting to hear about your leaders, Peter and John. You know what happened. A man was healed by the power of Jesus and Peter had delivered another fiery message. But now two of your beloved friends had been held overnight and taken before the same council that had condemned Jesus. So the community prayed . . . and they prayed . . . and they prayed.

What would you pray for? I suppose that many of us would pray for safety and security that we wouldn't be swept up by the authorities so we could go ahead with our kingdom work . . . or something like that.

But not those first disciples nearly 2000 years ago. Look at their prayer (Acts 24-29, esp. v, 29). They didn't pray for their safety but for courage and boldness! They don't want to stop proclaiming the Good News or water it down. They want the boldness to go right on and as they had been, heedless of the council or the guards or even the waiting crosses. Try reading that prayer (verses 24-30) while imagining that you are a Christian in lands controlled by those who hate Christ.

Will Willimon writes:

If I, like Peter and John, had had a close and potentially disastrous brush with the authorities, my prayer would be for divine protection rather than boldness! Yet, the only thing the community asked of God is the power “to speak thy word with all boldness” (4:29). It is God’s business to heal and to work signs and wonders in the name of Jesus (4:30). It is the community’s business to speak the word with boldness in the midst of the mighty acts of God. The trembling and shaking of the place signify that the apostles’ prayer has been answered, and once again they are given a bold tongue to utter the word of God. . . .

What do Christians do when persecution threatens to undo the community? They turn to God, the same God who created the world and all of its inhabitants, the God who holds all things within his power. Even persecution, even persecution by powerful people, does not take us out of God’s hand. The same power which brought the world into being, which enables the community to worship will also be with the community in its times of persecution. (Willimon, W. H. (1988). *Acts* (p. 50). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.)

Standing firm

We Christians have always been called to lives of courage and boldness, in word and action. The Christians in Thessalonica (and there couldn’t have been many) are not so much discouraged as they are fearful. Someone has come into town proclaiming that Christ has already returned! “What could this mean? How could we have missed it?! The sky is falling!” I’m sure that all of us give into alarmism from time to time. What are we to do when we are alarmed? For them, as for us there was always something to fear – whether it was the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem or simply missing out. The question is how we cope with our fears. Paul urged the Thessalonians in three directions. I’m pretty sure he’d give the same advice to the disciples gathered after Peter’s arrest.

First, Paul reminds them that they had been called to Christ by the proclaiming of the good news. They are God’s chosen, his “fruit fruits” through whom God’s saving work would go forward. They could trust God’s choice, confident that they would “obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Second, Paul urged the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter” (2:15). The word “traditions” can mislead us a bit. Paul isn’t talking about clergy, robes, décor, or the order of worship. Rather, Paul is urging the believers to stand firm upon the teaching of the apostles, whether oral or written. The problem of false teaching cuts through nearly all of the New Testament. Whether it was those who came to Thessalonica teaching that Christ had already come or those who went to Galatia teaching that believers had to keep Jewish law, in all cases, the apostles demanded that the Christian communities stand firm in the apostolic Christian faith.

Third, the Thessalonians could rest in the “eternal comfort and good hope” of God’s love. Indeed, verses 16 and 17 are something of “wish-prayer.” Paul encourages the Christians to hold to the comfort offered by Christ. It is not so much that Paul is praying that the Thessalonians will get something they lack; Paul prays that they will embrace what is already theirs. May we do the same!

2 Thessalonians

Two of the 27 New Testament books are letters from the apostle Paul to the house churches in Thessalonica, Greece, which was a large, prosperous city that had been granted special privileges by Caesar. It is located on the Aegean Sea in far northern Greece. You can visit Thessaloniki today, where ancient ruins have been excavated near the city center.

Paul’s letters to the churches he founded were always pastoral and always written for a reason. In the case of this letter, it seems that Paul has learned that some persons have spoken in Paul’s name and told the Thessalonian Christians that the “day of the Lord,” Christ’s second coming, had already happened! Also, Paul has been told that the free-loaders he admonished in an earlier letter (1 Thessalonians) had not mended their ways.

Thus, this letter not only encourages those who are suffering, but also urges the Thessalonians not to be misled regarding the second coming of Christ. Paul is notoriously difficult to interpret in places; e.g., who or what does he mean by the “lawless one” (2:3)? Nonetheless, Paul, like Peter and Jesus, urges the believers to be very cautious and modest in their beliefs about the timing of Christ’s return.

Many Christians find it tempting to get caught up in expectations about Christ’s return. Every generation can find signs pointing to Christ’s imminent return. Christians have been finding such signs for 2,000 years. But as the author of 2 Peter wrote, “...the day of the Lord will come like a thief” (2 Peter 3:10).