

Gospel Prayer & Power

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at Christchurcheastbay.org. Good morning.

I'm Julie Brown and I'm part of the Tuesday Night Community Group and Women Reading Women. Today's scripture reading is from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 4, verses 1 to 4, 8 to 13, and 23 to 34, as printed in your liturgy.

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people.

They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.

[1:16] But many who heard the message believed, so the number of men who believed grew to about 5,000. Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, Rulers and elders of the people, if we are being called to account today for an act of kindness, shown to a man who is lame, and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel.

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.

Jesus is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone. When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

[2:53] You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David. Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one.

Indeed, Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.

They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.

Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Lord of God boldly.

All the believers were in one heart and mind. No one claimed any of their possessions as their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.

[4:19] This is the word of the Lord. Good morning, Christ Church. It's a joy to start with some good news here that Ali and Tyler Britton have brought home their baby boy, Matthew Thomas Britton.

And so we give thanks to God and we praise God for the gift of life, the joy of walking alongside Tyler and Ali and helping them raise this child up in this church.

Well, we're exploring the Acts of the Apostles, and why are we doing that? We're doing that because we want to get a sense of genuine Christianity. What is authentic, original, real Christianity?

And last week, we met this man who had been lame since he was born for over 40 years, but he was healed.

He was made whole by the power of Jesus, resurrected and reigning in heaven. And we're told that he began walking and jumping and praising God.

[5 : 31] And then Peter began to proclaim the power that had healed him from his lameness. And what we see at the beginning of this text is kind of following on that story, is that this message of Jesus, the message of the power of the resurrection, it creates two basic responses.

We can see in verse 4 that many people heard this message and they believed, and they committed themselves publicly to the life of the church as an expression of their faith.

And then there's this other group in verses 2 and 3, they responded to this message in the opposite way. They responded with unbelief. It says that they were disturbed by the message.

They were annoyed by it. And so they began to act, in this case, they began to act to stop it by seizing Peter and John, throwing them in jail, putting them on trial.

I think we all know that if you're trying to get to know who someone really is, if you're trying to get to know what a group of people is really like, it's one thing to be with them when the sun is shining and all is well.

[6 : 42] You're on vacation. There is no stress. But it's a totally other thing to see the real heart of a person, to see the real character of a community when we're put under pressure, when the heat is dialed up and the stress is piled on.

How do we respond? Well, like squeezing a toothpaste tube, something's going to come out. And the question is, what is it?

Is it going to be good? Is it going to be bad? And what is it that comes out of Jesus' disciple community as they're being squeezed in Acts chapter 4?

And I want us to think about what are the marks of a living church, a healthy church, a biblical church, that lives faithfully even under stress and under pressure.

And so I'd like for us to consider three marks of the church this morning. I want to talk about a spirit-filled boldness, a confident prayerfulness, and a unified graciousness.

[7 : 48] If you're taking notes, a spirit-filled boldness, a confident prayerfulness, and a unified graciousness. Let's think for a minute about a spirit-filled boldness.

Anytime we read a great work of literature, it's important to pay attention when the author is repeating key words or key phrases.

And you'll notice in verse 8, it says that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, and then he says it again in verse 31, the church is filled with the Holy Spirit. And you'll also notice in verse 13, it says they saw the courage, or the boldness of Peter and John.

And then down in verse 29, it says they pray that they would speak God's word with great boldness. And in verse 31, it says they spoke the word of God boldly.

Now, if the church had tried to live out her faith and carry out her mission by her own resources and her own abilities, she would have failed and failed spectacularly.

[8 : 49] But these first Christians said, you know, yes, we've been filled by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but we know that we need to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit, as Paul says in Ephesians 5.

We need to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit to ask for the presence of the Holy Spirit, to seek the power of the Holy Spirit. And why do they seek for that? Why should we seek for that? Well, because we need courage.

We need boldness to say things and to do certain things. If you think with me for a minute about our favorite Berkeley bumper stickers and the kinds of things that they tell us to do, here's some of my favorites.

Subvert the dominant paradigm. Question authority. Resist. Speak truth to power. These are the kind of things that the church is being called upon to do in this moment.

The Christian message and the Christian mission is being challenged by the authorities and Peter is needing courage to challenge the challengers. And you'll notice in verse 13, it says, when they saw the courage of Peter and John and they realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they

were astonished.

[10:02] And they took note that these men had been with Jesus. See, the Holy Spirit filled these Christians with the same courage that Jesus had when he would go out to the helpless and the hopeless with God's power, when he would talk to the skeptical and the critical with God's truth, they were filled with the same courage of Jesus.

It's clear that Jesus' courage is being reproduced in Peter and John by the Holy Spirit. And the question is, how can we have Jesus' spirit-filled boldness reproduced in us today?

Well, think about for a moment what's the opposite of courage. The opposite of boldness is fearfulness. It's timidity. It's cowardice.

And that, I think, would be the natural response in this moment when the authorities who've just crucified Jesus a few months before have now put you in jail and put you on trial.

And we remember when Jesus was arrested, what happened to Peter? Peter fell prey to fear. He fell prey to cowardice when he denied Jesus three times.

[11:18] And so, without the Holy Spirit, without courage in this moment, it would be so easy for Peter to fall into that yet again. But when the Holy Spirit fills Peter fresh, and when the Holy Spirit fills us afresh, he transcends our abilities and he transforms our inabilities.

And what he does with Peter here is he gives Peter freedom. He gives Peter confidence and conviction. He gives Peter assurance and authority to speak gospel truths that people did not want to hear and that people, even today, still don't want to hear.

And what do I mean? Well, listen to what Peter says in verse 10. He says, Now, there are at least three essential but unpopular Christian doctrines here that people just didn't, want to, and still don't want to hear.

And the first one is the doctrine of sin. He says in verse 10, You crucified Jesus. And this reminds us that the good news always involves bad news.

That the human condition is so fallen. Our human nature is so corrupt. That when the one that God approved came to us, we rejected him. And that means, by definition of being human, each and every one of us are complicit in this cosmic miscarriage of justice.

[13:07] That we stand guilty before the judgment of God. Peter has the boldness to say in verse 12, You must be saved. That all people, no matter who you meet, they're in a plight and they're in a predicament from which we cannot save ourselves.

We need a Savior. And what Peter's saying is that you have a problem that's so great, the only way for God to deal with it was for his son, Jesus, to die on the cross.

No wonder Peter needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit because it takes courage to speak in such a way as to bring people under a conviction that they see their need to be saved from their sins.

But there's a second essential but unpopular Christian doctrine that Peter speaks about here and it's the doctrine of resurrection. In verse 10, he says that God raised Jesus from the dead.

That when God powerfully raised Jesus from the dead on Easter Sunday, he showed that Jesus' death on the cross really did atone for sins.

[14:19] That Jesus really is the one who took our sin upon himself in order that we might have his righteousness. And this doctrine is another reason that Peter needed to be filled with the Spirit and filled with courage because no one had ever seen or even heard of or experienced a resurrection in the middle of history before.

People had their defenses up. A dead man walking was just outside of their plausibility structures of what was possible. And they were skeptical.

They were critical. They found a resurrected Jesus hard to accept into their working paradigm of reality. Now those first two are challenging, but this third one's really challenging.

This third essential but unpopular Christian doctrine that Peter speaks about, we could call the doctrine of Christ alone. And he says, verse 12, that there's only one way, there's only one means, there's only one person by which human beings can experience salvation.

Again, hear it in Peter's own words. Verse 12, salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved. And that was a radical, provocative statement in that time.

[15:38] It also, in our day, stands diametrically opposed to both postmodern relativism and religious pluralism. And people read that and they say, well, how arrogant.

How exclusivist, how narrow-minded, how triumphalist. We find this verse a shocking and implausible claim that's quite difficult to accept.

And so you'll hear many people say that either all paths to God are equally valid and viable or there is no God and there is no path. But let's just examine that for a moment.

What Peter says here is the inevitable and inescapable implication of the claims that Jesus made for himself.

And I'll give you a few of them. This is from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 19. Jesus said, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

[16 : 36] Jesus says in that statement that human beings are lost and they're in need of being saved and he says, I'm the one who's come to save them.

I and I alone am the Savior. That's straight from the words of Jesus' mouth. Or in John, the Gospel of John, 8, 9, and 12, he says, I am the light of the world.

Whoever believes in me will not remain in darkness. Jesus says that darkness-loving humans need light and I and I alone am that light.

He goes on in the Gospel of John, John 14, he says, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you look at Buddha, if you look at Confucius, if you look at Socrates and Muhammad, did any of these people ever claim anything even remotely close to what Jesus said?

I think if you look at the record of history, they did not. So if we assess them on the basis of their own claims, we cannot say that they're all on the same level.

[17 : 49] After Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, he said to his disciples, this is again in Luke chapter 24, he says, this is what is written, the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations.

All the nations. You see, Jesus, when he says that, he refuses to sit in a row with other founders of world religions or other great thinkers of the past because he has made claims that none of them ever dared to make, which is that he conquered death and he can forgive sins and he and he alone can do that and that implies that Jesus is not only unique, Jesus is supreme and superior.

If you embrace postmodern relativism and religious pluralism and you say, no one should insist that their view of God is better than the rest, what you said is true, it could only be true, first of all, if there just is no God or second, if God is such an impersonal force that he doesn't care what any of our doctrinal beliefs are about him.

So as you say that statement, that there's only, there can only be one way, no one should insist that their view of God is better than the rest, if you say that, you're assuming by faith a very particular view of God and you are pushing it as better than all the rest, which is the very thing you're saying that people should not do.

To say no one should insist that their view of God is better than the rest is itself a very white and western view based on European enlightenment's idea of knowledge and values.

[19 : 46] But the question for you today is why should that one particular view be privileged among all the other views? You're basically saying whether you've read him or not, Immanuel Kant's take on knowledge, truth, and spirituality is right.

And the Jewish way, the Christian way, the Buddhist way, the Muslim views on these things are all wrong. But that seems tolerant on the surface, but it's actually just as exclusive as the Christian claim.

What you've done is you've inserted your construct of reality as the right one and you've thrown all the other ones out as wrong. And so I just want to appeal to you to think about it.

Just sit with these essential but unpopular doctrines of the Christian faith and just think about it.

What if I'm wrong? What if Peter's right? What if Jesus is right?

What if Jesus' claims are true? What if he's ultimate reality? What if I'm not in line with ultimate reality?

[20 : 54] That's the challenge before you. That's the challenge that Peter has put before these people. Get in line with ultimate reality. He had a spirit-filled boldness.

There's no way he could have said that without the Holy Spirit filling him with boldness. And we can't do it either. Well, the second mark I want to focus on is a confident prayerfulness.

And I think this is where the spirit-filled boldness came from is a confident prayerfulness. When you look at this story, the authorities, they realize, okay, I think we've got a problem here.

This Christianity thing is a problem. And this message is going to begin to infect many, many more people unless we go about some sort of containment.

And so, they try to contain the infection with raw power and with intimidation. And so, they command the church not to speak or to teach anymore in the name of Jesus.

[22:02] And this is really the situation of many, many Christians around the world today, right now, that they're facing similar threats that if they speak in the name of Jesus, they'll not just be arrested, but they'll be flogged.

They'll be put to death, which if you keep reading the Acts of the Apostles is what happens. The next chapter, they're flogged. A couple chapters later, they begin to be put to death. Here in Acts chapter 4, the Christians, it's the first time the Christians realize some of us are going to die. Some of us right here in this congregation, we, we're going to have to die for our faith. And so what do they do? Well, here is the, I think we find the best test of a profession of faith, which is the test of trials.

The test of, of tribulations and troubles. What do we do when our life and our faith come under fire? And the ultimate test, I think, of our profession of faith is what is our prayer life like when we're being tested?

And what do these first Christians show us about how to pray? And I want you to just look at verse 23. It says that on their release, Peter and John went back to their own people.

[23:13] They reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. Sovereign Lord, they said, you made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

These are the characteristics of true prayer that are put before us, before these, by these people who are being threatened with extermination, with death, with the end of their lives.

And what we notice, first of all, is their calmness. Notice their quiet, assured confidence with which they speak. They're talking to a person that they know and a person that they love.

You know, we too are living in turbulent times, right? We're living in a world on fire, a world in crisis. We're living not really sure if we're honest with ourselves what's going to happen next.

But the question for us is do you know how to pray? Do you know how to talk to this person that you know? Do you speak confidently with him?

[24:18] Do you lift up the whole of your situation in which you are involved to him? Because that is what authentic Christians do. And I want to, I want to say that you don't have to wait until your pastors are thrown in jail to begin to pray this way.

You can do it, you can do it today. Some of you are dealing with hard circumstances in your life, in your family, in your work. Do you know how to pray your way through those?

My wife and I are going through a difficult and stressful situation right now with our extended family. But thank God we're not alone.

Thank God we're not left to our own resources. Thank God that we can raise our voices in prayer and say Lord do you confidently come to this God that you know who's a living God?

He's a living person. He's a God who acts. He's a God who knows where we are. He's a God who knows what our circumstances are. He's a God who's able to do something about them.

[25:27] Do you say to him Lord? Because that's what they say in verse 24. They say sovereign Lord you made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

They acknowledge him as the creator and the sustainer and the ruler of all things. They affirm his absolute transcendent power. They say your might and your authority is limitless.

You're the king of the universe. You're the high king of heaven and there is no sphere including my troubled sphere right now. There is no sphere of created reality that is not under your control in heaven or on earth or in the sea none of the creatures in any of those places.

They're all under your dominion. And to quote the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper he said there is not a square inch in the whole creation of our human existence over which Christ who is sovereign over all does not cry mine.

The essence of true prayer is to take your terrible and terrifying circumstances directly with confidence and assurance to this sovereign Lord. Do you know him like that?

[26:49] Do you turn to him in this way in your hour of need in your hour of trial? Do you pray to him not just as the creator and the sustainer and the ruler of all things but this church begins to pray to him as the revealer.

He's the one who's revealed himself. He's revealed his purposes because he's spoken by the Holy Spirit through his servants who wrote the Bible like Moses and like David like the prophets and the apostles and here's what they say in their prayer.

They say you spoke sovereign Lord you spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant our father David. This is Psalm 2 wide of the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain.

The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one. You see the church is quoting this God inspired God authored Bible back to God.

They're quoting Psalm 2 they're quoting this prophecy about the Messiah that was written about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus and when they say it there's just a calmness and there's a confidence to their praying because they not only know their Bible but they know the God of the Bible and they know this God who's brought the Bible to focus and fulfillment in his Messiah.

[28:11] David said why do the nations rage? Why do the kings of the earth rise up? Why do the rulers band together and plot against the Lord and scheme against his anointed king who's going to bring justice and peace to the earth?

You see Psalm 2 is about God's king who will be targeted by conspiring enemies and yet he will emerge victorious.

That's why they chose that psalm. These first Christians are pouring out their hearts to this living God the God of Abraham the God of Israel the God of the universe who's shown time and again that the empire of Egypt is nothing to him the kingdoms of Babylon are nothing to him this God who's continually acted and intervened on his people's behalf this God who has shown that nothing absolutely nothing is impossible for him that even though the nations rage even though the peoples rebel against him everything is under his control he is sovereign he has a plan and you know what's happening to their fears as they pray that and remember that they're melting away in the presence of God and then they say in verse 27 indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed they did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen you see their prayer acknowledges that even the apparently disastrous things that took place as

Jesus went to the cross were not outside of the will of God the wickedness of these rulers is held in check by and it's contained within the overall purpose of God who makes even human wrongdoing turn to his praise and what the church is realizing in this moment is that the Lord of creation and the Lord of revelation is also the Lord of providence and the Lord of redemption and they say to themselves what a horrible thing that Jesus should be crucified but also we realize that if that had not happened then our sins would not have been wiped out and we would never have come to know the living God and they say the cross of Jesus the death and defeat of the Messiah proved to be God's secret weapon for redeeming sinners and redeeming this world and so if God if God exerts absolute control over his universe and if he could bring such goodness out of the absolute terribleness of Jesus cross well then surely he can take care of me surely he can take care of us and our trials and our troubles as well and so they pray in verse 29 now Lord consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word of great boldness stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant

Jesus I gotta admit that is not what I would have prayed they don't pray Lord give us safety and comfort and protection which is what I think I probably would have prayed they don't pray Lord cause our enemies to die horribly which is what I sometimes want to pray they don't pray Lord please stop them from being so unpleasant or Lord let this persecution stop and change our circumstances rather quite simply they pray now Lord look on their threats let us go on speaking your word boldly and will you please continue to work powerfully and when they say that what they're saying is the Lord of creation and the Lord of redemption is the Lord of the church and the church's mission Lord we know that the opposition is there they always have been there they're always going to be there but we also know that we're here too and we want to be faithful we want to speak boldly of

[32:39] Jesus so that more and more people in this city can come to know him as the Savior that he truly is even if that puts us in risk even if that puts us in danger and Lord we also want you to demonstrate your saving power and keep radically transforming people's lives so that it will be clear that you're doing a new thing in Jesus see the church needs to learn and every generation what it means to pray with confidence such God centered scripture saturated Christ glorifying prayers I don't know about you but I read this prayer and I feel like I could probably grow a little bit in my

prayer life we could probably grow a little bit in our prayer life the church needs again and again the sense of God's powerful presence shaking us up filling us up with the Holy

Spirit and giving us this same confidence that really only comes through prayer and that's the second mark of the church a spirit filled boldness a confident prayerfulness and I just want to say one brief word here at the end about this final mark a unified graciousness a unified graciousness I think you're probably aware if you've studied much history that from this point on over the next 300 years the church will be persecuted more and more intensely and yet also over these next 300 years the Lord will sweep about half of the Roman Empire into the church and that's amazing because here's this church that is making these most exclusive claims about Christ and yet she's also being experienced as the most inclusive community that the Roman Empire or the world had ever seen and the reason for that inclusivity is that the church had a radical lifestyle the church was this countercultural community that was strikingly different than everything else and it was strikingly attractive and here's why it says in verse 32 all the believers were one in heart and mind no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own but they shared everything they had with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them the church was one in heart and mind absolutely unified which is the exact opposite of our society right now polarized partisan just divided as it possibly could be the church was together one heart one mind and what united them was the grace of God it was the grace of God that had caused each and every one of them to be reborn into this family where all of them called God Abba father that's why they were one in heart and mind and the the work of the grace of God was so powerful in their lives it was so powerful in their midst that they were being transformed by that grace they were becoming a gracious people and they were becoming so gracious that they said to people outside of their own flesh and blood outside of their own biological families they said to people who could not be more different than them they said we're going to be spiritual family you are my sister in Christ you are my brother in Christ come here because I want to share with you my time I want to share with you my money I want to share with you my food I want to share my support with you whatever I have is yours and they gave away their money so that if any of them was in need the church was meeting that need because they were the family of God and they were loving one another in acts of love and I've seen this and I've experienced this so many times right here in this church and so I just want to encourage you if you're new to our church if you've been a part of our church for a little while but you're not yet part of a group in this church you just kind of come on Sundays and then you come back the next Sunday I want to encourage you to join a community group as they launch next month because these groups are the places where we live this way our groups are places where we can belong in inclusive community where we can express the unity of knowing God as our father where we can pray for God's grace and power to be unleashed in our lives where we can live like God's family to support and care for each other's needs spiritually relationally practically where we can encourage one another to live out this unified graciousness this radical generosity isn't that isn't that what you want isn't that what we need may God give us the grace to live like the original

[38:16] Christians to live authentic Christianity in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit
amen