

Reflection

Acts 4: 1-12

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Title: Express Yourself

Prayer: Loving God, help us be bold in our sharing of your love. Help us be humble in our sharing of your love. Generous Creator, may we hear a message now that just helps us share your love somehow. Amen.

Did you ever grow up being told things like “Don’t get too big for your britches” or “dress well but not so well that you stand out” or “don’t speak unless you’re spoken to” or “whatever you do, don’t draw attention to yourself” or “be polite, always be polite.”

Or, maybe you were told never to talk about politics or religion – ever.

These suggestions, I’m sure, were shared to help us avoid conflict, help us get along, help us get asked again to the party or business meeting or formal engagement or influential networking moment.

I don’t think the apostle Peter ever got those messages. He was bold and overt once he started healing and preaching.

Every chance he got he witnessed to the crowds.

The last line from our passage today is a doozy: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Yikes.

And he gets at it in the previous chapters too.

After he and John have healed the man at the gates of the Temple in chapter three, he turned to the crowds and offered a long speech. Halfway through he said “And by

faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.” (vs 16)

And, in chapter two after the Feast of Pentecost he speaks at length to the crowds and ends with this: “therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made [Jesus] both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (vs 36)

This is the beginnings of our faith, our church, our community. This is our lineage. This is the band of faithful apostles that we are to learn from in how to be a community of followers of Jesus ... the Christ ... the Messiah.

Un unh. We cringe at that, don't we?

That's not who we are.

Learning about the life of Jesus and what he taught may be instrumental to how we live our lives; but we don't see our job as telling other people about it ... well, that would be rude, overt. It would be like talking politics or religion. It would be like drawing attention to ourselves. We were taught not to do that.

So, what do we do with some of these overt proclamations that come from our ancestors in the faith, who were extremely faithful and fervent in their beliefs about Jesus? And who have been instrumental in helping us develop our faith?

I've been thinking a lot about what the environment must have been like at the time. What caused those fledgling apostles to be so loud and proud? They were going against the grain, the authorities didn't like Peter's confidence. We heard this morning that they were arrested – and it wouldn't be the last time. They just kept sharing and teaching and healing and preaching.

Around the time when the disciples had Jesus with them there would have been a variety of religious practices happening. Rome had a polytheistic religion and honoured many deities. The principle was “I give that you might give” and people

would have had shrines in their homes where they'd offer prayers. Add to this the influence of Greek mythology. Now add the different branches of the Jewish faith: the Pharisees who believed in the oral law that God gave to Moses at Sinai along with the Torah; and who believed in life after death. Then there were the Sadducees who were from the priestly caste and who took the written law more literally and were involved in rituals with the Temple; and who didn't believe in the afterlife. And, then there were the Essenes who were an outcropping of both the Pharisees and the Sadducees who thought 'forget this' and took off to the desert to live a more ascetic life.

Amy-Jill Levine who is a brilliant scholar and a professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies says that not all Jewish people agreed on everything during this time in history. They couldn't agree on who the Messiah would be ... a priest, a Davidic king, an angel, a human, a shepherd, something else? There wasn't full agreement on life after death, or what the relationship to Rome should be, or what counted as scripture. Some read the scriptures in Greek and some in Hebrew.

What they did agree on is that they loved God, they followed the Torah, they were people of Israel in a covenantal relationship with God; and they knew they descended from Abraham, escaped Egyptian slavery and received the 10 commandments at Mt. Sinai.

So, it was an environment with lots of differing beliefs and opinions. Lots of voices trying to be heard.

When we read about Jesus debating with the Pharisees our first thought is "oh, fighting in public, not good." But for the folks living in that time, debate was absolutely appropriate.

So, the bold and brash claims that Peter makes fit completely into the context of his time.

Which begs the question ... how then can we contextualize the bold messages of this community for us today without losing any of the passion and good-naturedness of its intent?

It's helpful that the same author wrote Luke and Acts. It offers some strong continuation. In Luke we have Jesus in the flesh teaching the disciples about God and repentance and the forgiveness of sins; showing them healings and wonders; modelling for them an open table and radical invitation and inclusion. Then we move to Acts and the disciples (students) turn into apostles (messengers) and Jesus is still with them, just not in the flesh. He's with them because they believe in him. God abides in the apostles and acts in them, and they continue Jesus' ministry of preaching and serving and healing and sharing.

God lived in them and God lives in us. Does God live in us differently 2000 years later? I thought it would be easy to find the differences, but it's more nuanced than I thought. Like, we're not that much different today.

There was a variety of religious practices back then, just as there are now. But perhaps our fervent boldness has been tempered by learning about its impact on interfaith dialogue, equal rights, truth and reconciliation, restorative justice.

There were rulers back then who tried to stamp out Jesus' message of a new loving, sharing, just life in God because it would mean a diminishment of their power. There are rulers today who want to lead by power and greed.

It is hard to relinquish our own power. Jesus was desperate for us to trust in the power of God, and not our own power.

Perhaps one significant difference that stands out is that those apostles were pounding the pavement to build the church. They were doing a good job – in today's passage it says the new converts numbered 5000. That's impressive. That kind of recruitment would require some bold statements.

I'm not saying that Christians in the recent past haven't pounded the pavement. And, I'm not saying that we don't sometimes hear bold statements about coming to Jesus. But, I do get the sense that we have learned to be more quiet about our faith – why we believe.

Whether that's because we enjoyed the comfort of folks showing up during the mid 20th century; or whether that's because we feel shame about our involvement in the residential school system, or embarrassment by proxy of the actions of other Christians; we have somehow trained ourselves to be a bit more quiet about the power of God's love in our lives.

And we find ourselves caught. Caught between the modelling those apostles gave us of shouting the message from the mountaintops; and our more recent historical experience of people knowing who we are without us having to say too much.

What are we supposed to be now?

Just like the apostles, Jesus is still with us, just not in the flesh. He's with us because we believe in him. God abides in us and acts in us, and we are called to continue Jesus' ministry of preaching and serving and healing and sharing.

God lived in them and God lives in us.

If we no longer feel comfortable (or ever did) saying something like what Peter said "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" then what do we say now?

How can we express God's deep and abiding love for us in a way that is humbly bold; respectful of other beliefs; gentle to the non-churched ear; and yet still full of passion for how God so generously loves us into being?

We might use words like the anthem today, "it's a love that has brought you eternal life and a love to sustain you through all your life, my love I give to you."

We might talk about why we became an affirming church or why we offer the territorial acknowledgement each week ... Because all are loved and cherished in the heart of God.

We might live in constant gratitude that we have the ability to sponsor refugee families ... because Jesus modelled seeking out the ones who need – need community, love, support, justice, a meal.

We might reflect on how God's love has actually changed and steered our lives; and then write down a few catch phrases that feel comfortable to share.

We might sit on the bench at the front of the church with a sign saying "Ask me about God's love."

It might not be that God lives in us any differently now than she did 2000 years ago; it might be that we choose to express ourselves differently in today's context.

But ... the key to it all is that we express ourselves.

May it be so.

Amen.