

A Community of Unstoppable Courage

Acts 4:1-20

Introduction

Shannon Wray worked hard through her high school career, and as a result was honored to be named the salutatorian of her graduating class. That honor also meant, of course, she had earned the opportunity to give a speech at the commencement ceremony.

The administrators of her school gave her a basic outline for her speech. She was being asked to speak about the past four years, including how the friendships she made with other students helped her get through high school. Shannon, however, is a dedicated Christian, and she felt that she could not give any speech without talking about how her best friend, Jesus Christ, helped her through school.

Shannon was required to submit a copy of her speech to the administration ahead of time, which she did. The school, not surprisingly, censored large portions of that speech. They prohibited her from making any religious references. Shannon decided to fight back. She took the matter to the Liberty Counsel, a Religious Civil Liberties Legal Defense Organization and together they took the matter to court. Shannon won, and on the day of her graduation she delivered the speech she had always intended to make. Here is part of what she said:

"There is a person who, even more so than the classmates that I love, has been there with me every day, never forcing me to do anything, but always encouraging me to stretch my limits and strive for the best He has to offer. His name is Jesus; He is my greatest friend."

She went on to say, "It is because of Jesus that I have achieved and succeeded, and, no matter how much knowledge the teachers at this school have bestowed upon me, I would know nothing if I didn't know Him."

The courage that Shannon demonstrated that day is the same courage demonstrated by Peter and John in today's text when they were called before the Jewish ruling council. So profound was the courage of those two disciples that every member of that ruling council noticed it. Verse 13 states:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished ... (Acts 4:13)

It is this same courage that characterizes the church Jesus came to establish. In the words of this sermon series, it is an

UNSTOPPABLE COURAGE

Today's text is actually a continuation of last Sunday's text. Last week, you may remember, we followed Peter and John as they went to the Temple for the daily 3:00 prayer service. Along the way they met a man who had been lame from the birth. He was now over 40 years old.

His condition meant he had no way to earn an income, so his only choice was to beg for coins from those who were entering the Temple to worship. Among those going to the Temple on this particular day were Peter and John. These two disciples did not offer him any coins. But they did offer him something far better.

Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk. (Acts 3:6)

And, lo and behold, the lame man not only started to walk, but he also started to jump around with great excitement as he tested out those legs! He even danced his way into that 3:00 prayer service.

Those worshipping there that afternoon were:

... filled with wonder and amazement (and) were astonished ... (Acts 3:10-11)

If the story ended there, we would add "and they all lived happily ever after." But the story ends a different way. Word of this miracle quickly reached a different group of people present in the Temple that afternoon:

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. (Acts 4:1)

The members of this second group were NOT filled with "wonder and amazement," nor were they astonished. Quite the opposite. The text describes them as:

They were greatly disturbed... (Acts 4:2)

Other translations use the word "furious" or "indignant." These religious leaders held their positions of power because Rome let them hold those positions, on one condition. They had to keep the people under control. Excessive displays of emotion were not allowed at time or any reason. This had to be stopped immediately before things got out of hand, so Peter and John were arrested and thrown into jail overnight.

The text sets up an interesting contrast between the way the world operates and the way the Church of Jesus Christ operates. You see in the world everything comes down to authority and power. You see that in the first question asked to Peter and John:

Tell us, by what power and authority have you done this thing? (Acts 4:7)

And it was clear to the religious leaders even before the question was asked that there was no way Peter and John had any such authority. Just look at them!

They were unschooled, ordinary men ... (Acts 4:13)

But the Church of Jesus Christ is different. This church, this entity created by Jesus to confront the very gates of hell, operates from a totally different basis. It's not "authority." It's

UNSTOPPABLE COURAGE

And these two ordinary, unschooled guys had it, because they were ...

#1: ORDINARY PEOPLE WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY FILLING (v. 8)

Verse 8 tells us:

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them... (Acts 4:8)

The words that followed from Peter's mouth were spoken to an audience of the wealthiest, most intellectual and the most powerful people in the land, and yet Peter, an ordinary, unschooled fisherman from Galilee spoke, not as a prisoner on trial, but as the judge of those wealthy and powerful men.

Because he was. Not him per se. But the Holy Spirit in him. God, working through Peter, confronted those powerful and mighty men with their sin and called them to repent.

Peter was living out a promise that has been given to each Christian:

When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say. (Luke 12:11)

When Shannon Wray stood before her school administrators and in that court of law, it was the Holy Spirit who spoke through her. And each time you are told to be silent about your faith in this current culture it is that same Holy Spirit who will speak through you to confront the gates of hell that are before you.

But that's not all. These two ordinary, unschooled guys had an UNSTOPPABLE COURAGE, because they were ...

#2: ORDINARY PEOPLE WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE (v. 13)

Verse 13 tells us:

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. (Acts 4:13)

And it's true. For the past three years Peter and John had walked all across that part of the world in the shadow of Jesus as part of the 12 disciples. What's more they were two of the three disciples who formed the inner circle. They were able to witness firsthand the transfiguration of Jesus. They were invited deep into the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of His arrest. They had been with Jesus.

One writer said this:

There is no defense for Christianity more powerful than the life of a man or woman who has clearly been with Jesus.

When Jesus ascended into heaven – a day we will commemorate on May 16 – He made this promise to all who would follow Him:

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

Even before that He told them:

Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:20)

Our relationship with God is fostered by many things: our time reading our Bibles, our time in prayer, and in our time gathered together as the community of faith.

Finally, these two ordinary, unschooled guys had an UNSTOPPABLE COURAGE, because they were ...

#3: ORDINARY PEOPLE WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY CONVICTION (vv. 18-20)

Look at the way this text ends:

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:18-20)

Once again the earthly kingdom plays the authority card. They "commanded" these ordinary, unschooled men to stop what they were doing. The famous writer H. G. Wells, author of such memorable books as "The Invisible Man" and "War of the Worlds," once wrote:

The trouble with many people is that the voice of their neighbors sounds louder in their ears than the voice of God." (H.G. Wells)

Peter and John did not suffer from that malady. They had a firm conviction that what God says matters more than what anyone else says. So when the authorities of the earthly kingdom ordered them to keep silent, they refused, choosing instead to do what God had told them to do.

If our lector would have continued to read just a bit farther in Acts 4, you would have heard:

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened... 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. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. (Acts 4:21, 23-24, 31)

APPLICATION

John Knox was a missionary to Scotland, and is widely credited with bringing about the spiritual reformation of the Scottish people in the 1500s and in laying the framework behind the English Puritans. He was a man of incredible faith and courage. During his lifetime he was exiled, put into prison, and forced to resign his position more than once. Mary Queen of Scots hated him because he constantly challenged her authority on religious grounds. Despite it all, he persisted to be faithful to what God had called him to do.

When he died, the authorities of the earthly kingdom tried to keep anyone from finding out lest someone else would rise up to take his place. His epitaph reads:

Here lies one who feared God so much that he never feared the face of any man.

The church of Jesus Christ remains the most powerful force on the earth – a force that breaks down hell's gates with the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a church of UNSTOPPABLE Grace, UNSTOPPABLE Faith and UNSTOPPABLE Courage.

Let's pray ... Amen.