

Delivered: Saint Paul UMC (Lincoln, NE) on May 2, 2021 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter)

SERMON: A PRAYERFUL COMMUNITY

Series: “A Resurrected Community”

Text: Acts 4:23-31

By Jed Linder

OPENING PRAYER

*Let us pray... Gracious God, we thank you for this time together to worship, to pray, and fellowship with one another. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and prepare our hearts and our minds for your message to us this day. In Jesus name we pray, amen.*

**I. INTRODUCTION: LIVING AS A RESURRECTED COMMUNITY**

We are still enjoying the Easter season – the most awe-inspiring and hopeful time of the church year – and we have been taking this time to focus on what the Easter event – that empty tomb – meant for the church 2,000 years ago, and what it means for our church today.

Remember, the Easter event 2,000 years ago changed things forever. It changed the lives of the followers of Jesus forever. It changed the way so many people worshipped God forever. And it changed the trajectory of history forever, as the world was introduced into a whole new way of life, a Christ way of life, a resurrected way of life, coming from the very first resurrected community.

And so, during this Easter season, we continue to look at this resurrected community in its infancy. This first church is a small collection of Jewish men and women who were made up of Jesus’ closest friends, family, and followers, all who witnessed the resurrected Lord, and were now telling people about it throughout the city of Jerusalem.

Specifically, we’ve been focused on this first church’s flourishing as it devoted itself to four practices that distinguished this group of Jesus’ followers as the resurrected community... and that ended up causing a big stir throughout the city of Jerusalem. Just to refresh our memory, let me read Acts 2:42, which lists all four of these practices [SLIDE: Acts 2:42, without my comments in the brackets]:

<sup>42</sup> The believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [that’s one], to the community [that’s two], to their shared meals [that’s three], and to their prayers [that’s four].

Now we’ve already talked about number 2, and the believers’ devotion to the community, or koinonia fellowship, as they practiced a radical generosity that provided for everyone among them. And last week we talked about number 1, and the courageous teaching and witness that the Apostles and the early church were demonstrating throughout the city, particularly at the temple which put them in some hot water with the Jewish leadership.

Today, we are turning to number 4: the believer’s devotion to prayer. But, make no mistake, just because we are focusing in on each specific practice in turn, they are all related to one another and were ongoing practices throughout the life of the first church. We’ll see today how prayer

and courage particularly are closely related, not least of which because today's passage follows directly on the heels of last week's passage.

## LAST WEEK...

So just as a reminder from last week, Peter and John were taken before the Jewish Sanhedrin, which is made up of the most powerful men in Judaism. They were powerful religiously, politically, and legally – they had the power of the court and they were the driving force behind Jesus' crucifixion... it's important to remember that for our message today. And before they reluctantly let Peter and John go, they commanded them – with the force of law – to never speak in the name of Jesus again. To which Peter and John, filled with the courage of the Holy Spirit, responded [SLIDE of the scripture], “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 4:19-20, NIV) [END SLIDE]

## II. WHO THEY PRAY TO

So now, we move directly to our Scripture for today, Acts 4:23-31 [SLIDES of the scripture]:

<sup>23</sup> 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.

So, notice, right away they return to the community, to their *koinonia* – where they find love and support – and let them know what's happened, and that there's trouble brewing. We continue:

<sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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?*

<sup>26</sup> *The kings of the earth rise up  
and the rulers band together  
against the Lord  
and against his Christ.*

<sup>27</sup> Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

Let's pause here a moment...

So, the apostles return home to their community, and the first thing they do is they start to pray. Which, admittedly, is not always the first thing many people do when something comes up. For many of us, prayer is the last thing we turn to, basically when all else fails! But not for these

people. Prayer is the first thing they turn to, and its corporate prayer – lifting up their voices to God together.

And they begin that prayer by reminding everyone who they are praying to: They are praying to the 1) God of Creation. This is the God who made everything, from the earth to the sky, to the animals and the people, to the things seen and unseen, known and unknown. And they are praying to the 2) God of Revelation. That is the God who sends words and communicates through the Holy Spirit inspiring people to speak out God’s word, will and way. Inspiring revelation on what is true, and what is false. On what is just and what is unjust. And revelation on *what was*, on *what is*, on *what should be*, and on *what will be*. And, finally, they are praying to the 3) God of History. The God of History who works throughout time, through both the good and the bad. Sending the prophets and preachers, the sages and teachers. And while peoples and nations rise up against God’s plans, against God’s messengers, against God’s Christ, ultimately, God has already decided the end, and God moves us ever toward that redemption.

And so, they are essentially answering the question they asked the Sanhedrin, “*who should we listen to: you or God?*” You guys? Who derive power through fleeting institutions and partnerships with oppressive regimes? Or God, who is the ultimate power beyond all of creation? You guys, who seek to silence God’s messengers, including God’s own son? Or God, who will not be silenced? You guys, who *think* they control everything? Or God, who actually *does* control everything?

They are reminding themselves who God is, why they are following this God, and why they will continue to disregard the threats and warnings from the societal elites while continuing to courageously speak out in, and live out of, the name of Jesus Christ. It’s the same thing we do when we begin the Lord’s prayer with “Hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come. They will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” We are remembering who it is we are speaking to, and whose will we are aligning ourselves with.

And so that’s the first five verses of their prayer. Now let’s finish the prayer...

### **III. WHAT THEY PRAY**

Continuing at verse 29 [SLIDES of the scripture]:

<sup>29</sup> Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. <sup>30</sup> Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

Again, let’s pause here.

If you didn’t think Jesus’ followers had changed because of the empty tomb before; and that they were no longer the disciples who ran from Jesus, frightened of trouble, but were now the courageous apostles willing to stare trouble in the face in order to follow Jesus, then listen closely to what this prayer is actually asking. Jesus’ followers are asking for the courage to speak further in the name of Jesus, and they are asking for signs and wonders to continue on, leading

people to Jesus. In other words, these people are asking for more of the exact same things that got Peter and John thrown in prison and their lives threatened in the first place.

- Instead of asking God to let them be silent, they're asking God to let them speak out all the louder!
- Instead of asking God turn down the heat and let things calm down, they're asking God to turn up the heat and let thy will be done!
- Instead of asking God to get them out of trouble, they are, essentially, asking God for even more trouble! And the courage to face that trouble head on!

This is a very courageous prayer, indeed. And a realistic one as well. Because these Jesus followers recognize that courage comes and goes, and if this is what is to come – if persecution is to come – God, we need you to prepare us for it with courage. They all knew this would cost them, they just needed the courage to keep going despite the cost.

So, we see here that prayer, communal prayer at that, is the catalyst for the courage that we talked about last week.

#### **IV. THE POWERFUL RESPONSE**

And our passage concludes with God's response to this prayer [SLIDES of the scripture]:

<sup>31</sup>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.

This is an awesome response, from a very awesome God.

Now, of course, this is not the only way to pray. We could do a year-long series on the different types of prayer and ways to reach out to God... but this is one very powerful way to pray, and it's the way this first church community, inspired by the resurrection of Jesus, prays when they begin to face trouble. And, frankly, it can raise some rather uncomfortable questions for me, and I imagine many of you, regarding some our prayer practices. Namely:

[SLIDE: first line] Do our prayers center on what *we want* from God?

[SLIDE: second line appears after the first line] Or do they center on what *God wants* from us?

#### **V. CONCLUSION: SOMETHING TO SAY**

And so, as a church following Jesus Christ, today. As a resurrected community living out the good news of Easter with a message of unity, generosity, justice and love for all we have something say... something to counter the messages around us of division, selfishness, domination, and cancellation. And by coming together in prayer, aligning ourselves with God's will and purposes for our lives and our church, we can be filled with the fire, courage, and love we need to say it... even if it's hard. Because it will cost at times in our lives... if it never costs, we may need to reevaluate our message and who, exactly, it is aligned with.

So, let's try it now. I invite you join me in prayer... and what a privilege it is to be able to pray directly to God like this...

JED

Almighty God... [Cut to shot of Candle, cross, or some other cutaway image]

It is you who brought about cosmic form and substance,  
You who breathed out life into the stillness.

BETH ANN

It is you, O LORD, "the compassionate and gracious God,  
slow to anger, abounding in love and perfect in faithfulness."<sup>1</sup>  
For who is God besides the Lord?  
And who is the Rock except our God?<sup>2</sup>

LYN'S STUDENT

You sent your son to bring the good news,  
To bind the brokenhearted,  
And to proclaim release for the prisoners, and freedom for the captives.  
Align our church and our lives with his mission, that he has passed on to us.

DAVID LUX

Rekindle in your these your people a dedication to Christ,  
A commitment to generosity, justice, and unity.  
And grant us the opportunities to boldly speak out in Jesus name,  
And to share your love with all people.

LYN

Remember our prayers, Gracious God,  
and remember your church, Saint Paul.  
Pour out your Spirit, empowering us with the courage to stand fast.  
And may you add to our number daily.  
In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 6:6

<sup>2</sup> 2 Samuel 22:32