



The Good Shepherd by Cranach the Younger

What has happened in Acts before this passage we heard this morning? God working through Peter and John by the power in the name of Jesus has miraculously and publicly cured a 40 year-old man who had been crippled from birth (see Acts 4:12,16). It would seem that these Apostles have cleared house to make room for God in their lives. Paul certainly understood about this concept of emptying himself to make room for God's Spirit (see 2 Tim.4:6 "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering"; see Phil.2:17 "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering... I am glad and rejoice with all of you).

Part of this "emptying-out" process for Peter and John meant emptying themselves of anger and vengeance. After the Apostles started performing these miraculous acts of healing, those people who were now coming to flock around Peter and John with hope in their hearts were the very same ones who just days previously had willingly participated in the condemnation and spectacle of the murder of the Lord Jesus. These peoples' hands were stained with the blood of the Son of God. Yet, by emptying themselves completely of all those thoughts of anger and vengeance, Peter and John were able to make room for The Lord. And part of this new peace of God which came to dwell within the Apostles was the power to forgive – to forgive even the murder of their Lord. And we are told that this combination of miracle and mercy brought the group of believers to a stunning number of 5000 family units (see Acts 4:4) just a few short days after the first Pentecost Sunday. So, these Apostles have emptied themselves of themselves, and accepted the Spirit of God in place of their spirit of brokenness. And something profoundly transforming has happened to them.

In the passage from Acts this morning, Peter and John have been arrested and faced with dire consequences. Yet they have not been afraid to continue boldly proclaiming their Christian witness. Look at the change that God has now wrought in their lives through the Power of His Holy Spirit. These are the same men who went running into the night when Jesus was taken prisoner. This was the same man who denied his Lord three times, even before the cock had crowed on Good Friday morning. Yet now, these men are willing to go out and proclaim the Gospel boldly. Something has happened to these men, something powerful (see Barns p. 400, 2.).

The fact that Peter and John were held over night by the temple guards (see Acts 4:3) was serious stuff. Because according to Jewish Law, any sentence which involved the life or death of an accused man must be handed down during daylight hours (see NIV Study Bible note, p. 1690, 4:3). The fact that Peter and John were being imprisoned under-guard, over-night probably meant that on the morrow, they were getting ready to have the court battle of their very lives. This wasn't Judge Judy that the Apostles were going to have to meet come morning!

But these two men have discovered that the only truly sure foundation on which a house can be built, the only unshakable bedrock which can withstand any storm is the truth of the Gospel. So they have emptied themselves of themselves, and accepted in place of their brokenness the Holy Spirit of God, and that Spirit has changed them. They are now willing to go out and do battle with the might of Jerusalem itself.

Why, this was unthinkable! How could two poor fishermen honestly believe that they could withstand the attacks of the most powerful, influential men of their society? How could these two poor fishermen possibly have had that kind of faith to put themselves out there against the ruling power of their day? Where did this new backbone of resolve come from?

You see, these two men, Peter and John have been profoundly and forever changed. And their world and ours will never be the same because of that change.

And did you notice one more change that has come about? Yes, these men, these disciples of Jesus have emptied themselves of themselves to make room for God's Holy Spirit. And these men have found a new, incredibly powerful faith coursing through them, a faith so strong that they are no longer afraid to go out and testify to the truth of the risen Christ, no matter the consequences and whatever the cost. And finally, these men have been given a radically different view of what's what in this world.

Early on in our marriage, Donna and I attended a rather lavish wedding near the Gulf-Coast. And the reception for this wedding, which had all the finery you could possibly imagine, was held at the home of a wealthy doctor, a surgeon. And this huge house, this mansion had been set aside that evening for the use of the new bride and groom, to celebrate their happiness with their friends. And when I met the wealthy surgeon that evening, I complimented him on his generous act to allow the new couple to use his house. And this surgeon said to me, "No, you don't understand. This isn't my house. Oh, yes, my name's on the deed, that's true. But I didn't do anything monumental to buy this land, or to build this house. You see, that was all done by the grace of God. So, this isn't really my house. It's God's house. And he and his children who He sends my way, well, God and His children can use this house anytime they want to."

That's what's happening here in this passage from Acts 4 as well. At this point in the history of the early church, these disciples are starting what's often called the great "Jerusalem Experiment." For a time in the early church, the followers of Jesus Christ under the leadership first of Peter and then of James, the younger brother of Christ – for about a generation, the earliest Christians thought that part of bringing the New Jerusalem down from heaven meant understanding that everything, **absolutely everything** belonged to God. And so they decided to hold their worldly goods in common. Yes, it would really appear that Christians in a way may have been the world's very first communist society! Now aint that a kick in the head!

I love this image of Barnabas. This is the first time that Doctor Luke introduces Barnabas into the account of Acts, Barnabas the Son of Encouragement who will become Paul's companion along so many miles of his journeys for the Lord.

Barnabas goes out and sells this piece of land he owns, and then he takes that money and goes and lays it at the Apostles feet (see Acts 4:36-37). "Here Lord. Here Lord, it's yours. It's always been yours, Lord. And I trust you to use this to the very best possible ends. Surely better than I ever could. I trust you with it. I trust you with my welfare. I trust you with my family. I trust you with my future. So here, Lord, it's yours. Now, you deal with it."

And this, evidently, was part of what needed to happen for the disciples of Jesus Christ to be truly transformed into the people of God that he could use in the building of His Kingdom. Yes, these disciples needed to empty out their brokenness and replace it with the forgiveness and the power of the Holy Spirit. Then these first followers of the Lord had to take hold of that powerful Spirit of God and stride forth in a new found faith, to boldly testify to the truth of the Gospel, no matter the odds or the consequences – to put themselves out there in front of God and everybody, to be willing to instruments of The Lord's peace and healing in a hurting world. But finally, they really did have to put some skin in the game. They had to take their money and put it where their mouth was; or spoken more Biblically they had to put their treasure where their hearts were (see Mt.6:21).

And did you notice what happened after they did these things? Did you notice that now, when these men and women of God prayed, we read that the very house where they stood was shaking with the power of their prayers (see Acts 4:31).

That's really all it takes you know! To accept the Spirit of God in place of your own brokenness; to take hold of that new Spirit inspired faith and be faithful witnesses in the world; and to actually place before the Lord for His use the time, and talent, and treasure that He has given you by His grace. That's really all it takes to shake the world.

This is Good Shepherd Sunday. In this Church in past years on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we've talked about what it means that Jesus is our Good Shepherd. But as I conclude this sermon on this fourth Sunday of Easter in the Year of Our Lord 2012, could I ask you please to reflect on what it actually means to be His sheep? Are you willing to be that flock? Are you willing to let go of your own desires for your future and replace them with the will of God for your life? Are you willing to trust in that Good Shepherd and faithfully follow Him in the direction and along the path that he leads you, publicly proclaiming His truth in the wider world, no matter the cost? And are you ready to put some skin in the game – are you ready to lay your time, and talent, and your treasure at His feet and ask Him to direct you about what his will is for all of those things?

Are you ready, in short, are you ready to shake your world?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

jwb† 04-26-18