

“Widening the Conversation”

A Sermon Based on Acts 4

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

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Dr. Jim Davis

I was going to start off the sermon this morning with a story about something else. I found a funny story about how we sometimes narrow things down too fast. But I'm not going to tell you that story because God rearranged my sermon!

It happened last Friday. I picked up the *Houston Chronicle*, opened it and read the headline, "Federal Judge Rules Day of Prayer Unconstitutional." And the moment I read it I felt that nudge. God was telling me to rearrange my sermon. I kept going. I read the story. As I did, I felt like I was being transported back in time and space; right back to the first century, right into the court of the Sanhedrin. And you probably noticed; we left out part of the story when we read Acts 4 this morning. We did it when I thought I was going to preach another sermon. But now that I'm preaching this one, I'd like you to hear at least part of what we left out, because it's the part of the story that contains the verdict of the court, not the one from last Friday but one from a day long ago.

Listen... In Acts 4:18 Luke writes, "They called them in again (Peter and John) and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." That was the verdict. And I'm sure it sounded as ominous to Peter and John as the order of the Federal Judge in Wisconsin sounded to many of us this week. But listen; listen now to Peter and John's statement. Listen to how they responded to the order of the court.

"Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you or to him? You must judge. As for us, we can't help speaking about what we have seen and heard." It was the right thing for two Christians to say in the first century. It's the right thing for Christians to say in the twenty-first century! But it's a risky thing to say in any century.

And in the story in Acts you can see the risk. You can see the confrontation building. When Peter and John speak publicly about their faith in Christ, at first, says Luke, the authorities, are just "disturbed." But when they continue to speak, Peter and John are arrested. They're held in jail, brought to trial, called to defend themselves, and when a decision is made by the court, it goes against them.

They're commanded not to speak anymore in the name of Jesus. (And by the way I think it's safe to assume that means in public prayers too.) And finally, Luke says, after their statement, Peter and John are threatened with further prosecution before they're released.

So it's pretty clear from the text. Although it may be the right thing for Christians to say what Peter and John said to the court, it may also may be a risky thing. Now truthfully, I need to be honest. The risk for Christians in America today is nowhere near as large as the risk was for Peter and John to speak in the name of Jesus in Jerusalem in the first century.

But even though that's true and it is, I hope you'll agree. Anytime a Christian speaks or prays in public there's always a risk. Sometimes it's small; like the social risk of offending. Sometimes it's large risk, like the risk of arrest. But there's always a risk. Anytime a Christian speaks or prays in public, there's always a risk. Two years ago, *USA Today* ran a story in its *Lifestyle* section titled "The Most Taboo Topic to Discuss at Work." The story was based on a survey conducted by a major Human Resource Management firm of almost two thousand Americans. They were asked to identify the top five issues that they felt were off-limits for discussion while they were working. The top five responses? Fourteen percent said "Money," 15 percent said "Politics," 16 percent said "Personal Life," 27 percent said "Office Gossip" and 29 percent said "Religion."

Now I imagine those results don't surprise you. You know them already, don't you? Religion's a risky topic to talk about at work or at school or in a whole variety of other social settings. So what should we do? What should Christians do when their faith starts to put their life at work or their life at school, or their social life, or any part of their life at risk?

Pray about it! That's the answer Acts gives us. But don't just pray about it personally. Widen the conversation. Acts 4 says that Peter and John "went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them." In other words they widened the conversation. Then they widened it even more. They told God what was happening. "They raised their voices," Luke says, "together in prayer."

And the prayer they prayed is probably meant by Luke to be a model for us. It's the longest prayer recorded in the Book of Acts. But it's not a prayer that's very well known. So let's take some time to look at it this morning.

The first thing to notice about the prayer is the way that it starts. You see if I was praying this prayer I would probably say "God," and then I'd move right into asking; asking for protection, or asking for guidance, or asking for something because that's what a lot of my prayers are. They're mainly "asking prayers."

But this isn't mainly an asking prayer. It's an "anamnesis prayer." And if that word sounds strange to you, it should. It's not an English word. So let me introduce it to you by telling you three things you need to know about it. It's Greek. It's really hard to say, and it means a "remembrance."

It's actually the word we use every time we come to communion and I say the words to you that Jesus said to his disciples. "Do this," he said, "in remembrance of me." But even more important than the word is the idea behind it, because as human beings when we find ourselves at risk, we have to decide. How will we respond? Will we respond naturally or will we respond spiritually?

You see, naturally we have something called a "flight or fight" response. I'm sure you've heard of it. You may have even experienced it during the first few minutes of this sermon because when human beings sense risk, they have a reaction. Instinctively they either become aggressive and look for a way to defeat the risk or they become passive and look for way to avoid the risk. Fight or flight; it's a universal, natural, human response to risk.

But the Bible tries to tell us, more than once, it's not the only response we can make to risk when it confronts us. There's another response we can make. It's a remembrance response. Now remembrance isn't an alternative our natural instinct. But it is an antidote to the piece of that instinct that usually tries to force to decide what to do too quickly. You see when we're in "fight or flight" mode, we usually think we need to make a decision, fast. It's all up to us. There's no one with us. We're all alone so we'd better choose; "fight or flight." That's what we think, isn't it? But it isn't true.

You see, spiritually speaking, if we belong to Christ, you and I are never, ever all alone. "I'm with you," the risen Jesus tells his disciples, "I'm with you always to the end of the age." And if you're a Christian that's a truth you need to remind yourself of almost daily.

Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian Pastor and the author of *The Message* explains how the promise Jesus made to his disciples after his resurrection transformed his life. "Look," he says, "if Jesus' word is true, it changes everything. It changes

every situation that you and I will ever face. Because if Jesus is in the situation with us, his presence makes a difference in that situation."

And Peterson is right. It does make a difference. But we need to remind ourselves of the difference. And that's the purpose of an "anamnesis prayer." It's not an "asking prayer." It's a "remembering prayer". It's a prayer that's consciously prayed to remind us that God is with us, even and maybe most of all when we feel ourselves at risk.

Look at the prayer in Acts 4. Look at the way it begins. It begins by remembering; remembering God is there with Peter and John and their friends in that risky moment in all their lives. It begins with a reminder of who God really is. "Sovereign Lord," the Christians pray, "you made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything ..."

And I love what Chuck Smith writes about this part of the prayer. "We have a tendency," he says to sometimes carry over our human limitations into our prayers. Sometimes we pray like we're really saying, 'O God, this should be an easy one for you.' Other times we pray like we're saying , 'O God, I doubt if you can handle this one.' Do you know what I mean? You see, we're often more conscious of our situation than we are of our savior. We're often more aware of the size of our problem than we are of the size of our God."

But we need to learn to combat our tendency to think of God as someone like us, especially when we're facing a risk in our lives. That's when we need to remember, to remember most of all that there's no risk bigger than a Sovereign God. "Sovereign Lord," Peter and John pray. "Sovereign Lord," the rest of the Christians in the house pray with them. And suddenly the Sovereign Lord is there with them, in the room. They can feel His presence. They can sense His power. And that changes everything.

Suddenly they remember not only their situation. They remember the Scripture. It comes to mind in the middle of their prayer. They say it out loud. It's the word from the Psalms that shows that God's people have always faced opposition from the rulers of this world, and should always expect that kind of opposition. And the Scripture makes Peter and John and the rest of those praying with them remember something else. The Sovereign Lord brought Jesus through the opposition he faced. And if God's sovereign power brought Jesus through death and resurrection, it can certainly be trusted to bring them through threats.

And now, now in light of what they're remembered, now the Christians in Jerusalem know what to ask. "Now Lord," they pray "consider the threats that our rulers have made against us and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."

What they need is to ask for boldness; courage to continue speaking the truth in love. The courage to do that comes from God. The example of how to do it comes from Christ. The inspiration to do it comes through the Holy Spirit. What Peter and John and the rest of the Christians in Jerusalem need is God's enabling. So that's what they ask for. And that's what God gives them.

And that's what we need too, you and I, in the middle of a pluralistic, post-modern, post-Christian culture. So we need to learn how to ask for it. We need to learn how to ask the same Sovereign Lord for the same enabling power that comes through the same Holy Spirit and gives us the courage Christ had to speak the truth and live out the truth and do it with courage, with courage and love.

We need to keep on praying too, in private and in public. And so, on the National Day of Prayer this year, on Thursday, May 6th I'm looking forward to leading our church in prayer all day and all evening, along with others members of our staff here and members of our Worship Committee and Prayer Team. Next week in your bulletin you'll find more information about how we intend to celebrate the National Day of Prayer right here in First Presbyterian Church.

And I hope many of you will take time on the National Day of Prayer to come and join us as we pray openly and publicly and boldly for ourselves, for our families, for our church and for our country.

But for today, for today, take home from this sermon this action plan. Let's widen our prayers. Let's remember to pray more than "asking" prayers. Let's remember to pray "anamnesis" prayers. Let's pray "remembrance prayers" and remind ourselves as we pray them that God's presence with us in any situation changes everything.

Let's pray