***HOW CAN I KEEP FROM…?***

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Texts: Acts 4:1-22 and 1 John 3:18-24

It began with a simple act of kindness. A man, lame from birth, was sitting at the gate to the temple, begging for alms. That was his life’s work. Each day he was carried there by friends, and laid at the gate so that he might ask for a handout from all who walked by. Sympathetic people dropped coins in his hand as they prepared to enter the holy space to offer prayers and praise. What better way to come into God’s presence than having demonstrated concern for the less fortunate! The Lord said:

*Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land. Give liberally and ungrudgingly when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you… (Deuteronomy 15:11, 10)*

That was Torah, God’s law. To be blessed you must be a blessing to others. So, people gave what they could spare to the lame man who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple – some ungrudgingly and generously, some less so.

The command is Torah for us as well. We are to give generously and ungrudgingly to meet the needs of the poor. They may not be lying at the door of the church with outstretched hands, but they are not far away. They can be found in our schools and neighborhoods, in homeless shelters and food pantries, along city streets and busy intersections, and behind closed doors where we never see them. Some of them come to the mobile clinic for medical care, and some we feed at Trinity Soup Kitchen. You and I are called to care for neighbors in need, whether they be down the street or across the globe, for as Jesus reminds us in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, our neighbors are not limited by geography, ethnicity, or friendship! So, when your hard-earned dollars are spent to feed the hungry, give thanks to God that you can help! When the taxes from your paycheck are used to fund lunch programs for hungry kids or to make medical care available to folks who can afford no insurance, give thanks to God that you can help. You can take issue with how best to meet the needs of the poor, but do not think for a moment that they are not your responsibility. *What you do for the least of these, you do for me*, says Jesus. *What you do not do for them, you do not do for me*.

Perhaps those words were on the minds of Peter and John as they passed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate to the Temple. They had no coins to offer, so they offered what they did have and what he never expected – healing. It wasn’t what the man asked of them. This wasn’t a reward for his faith; it was a miracle of grace. We have no inkling that Peter and John even knew they had such power to heal, but when Peter reaches out, takes the man’s hand, and bids him stand and walk, miraculously the man not only stands, but leaps for joy. Everyone is amazed, for they have seen this man at this gate for years. They know him – the lame man who begs at the Beautiful Gate. Suddenly he is lame no longer, and all who know him want to know why – how – who – has brought about this healing.

Thus is the door opened for the preaching ministry of Peter and John. The lame man’s healing is a sign of the power of God at work in them. Peter and John dispel any claim to that power for themselves. They healed in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It is ***his*** resurrection they proclaim, ***his*** messiahship to which they bear witness, ***his*** life and death that offer salvation to all. So powerful is their testimony, so persuasive the sign, that five thousand people come to believe in Jesus right there in the Temple, in the heart of institutional Judaism. And therein lies the problem for Peter and John.

The religious authorities don’t like rebels tromping all over their turf – especially rebels who tell of something the establishment finds blasphemous, especially when five thousand people believe them! It is bad enough to claim Jesus is the Messiah, but to do so in the Temple has a sort of “in your face” attitude about it. The biblical text is clear – Peter and John are arrested because the authorities are *annoyed* by their teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. The people are listening to them and believing; the authority of the religious establishment is being challenged. So, the leaders flex their muscle and have Peter and John arrested, held overnight, and brought to a hearing in the morning before the priests, scribes, and elders. They will hold them accountable! Yet, the question the authorities pose relates not to the resurrection, the message that so annoyed them, but to the healing of the lame man: *By what authority did you do this*?

That question opens the door for Peter to proclaim the good news of the Resurrection. Though he stands before a hostile audience, Peter does not flinch in proclaiming the truth: he healed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the messiah,

the one whom the leaders put to death but whom God raised to life,

the one rejected by the establishment but made the cornerstone by God,

the one in whom alone there is salvation.

The religious authorities offer no salvation; it is Jesus alone who saves. It is his death and resurrection that save us, not what we do, for we cannot save ourselves; nor can any human beings save us, regardless of what authority has been invested in them. That was the message he proclaimed by the power of the same Spirit by which he healed the lame man. But the religious authorities were unmoved. As Will Willimon wryly notes:

*When Peter spoke before the people five thousand repented and became part of the movement. But when much the same testimony was given before the authorities, Peter and John were sent packing and no one was saved.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The Holy Spirit does great things in me and in you and in those two disciples in Jerusalem. But the authorities resisted it, for sometimes the Spirit’s work is a scary thing.

Tony Campolo tells of a minister friend who went to see a woman in the hospital who had been diagnosed with cancer. She asked him to lay hands on her and pray in order to heal her. He reluctantly agreed, figuring he could do no harm, though doubting it would do much good. When he had finished his prayer, the woman began to get her things together.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m going home. You’ve healed me,” she replied.

“You can’t do that!” he said. “You need treatment.”

“Not anymore,” she said. “You healed me.”

After some negotiation, he finally convinced her to let the doctors run some tests and to his fearful amazement, they all came back negative. The cancer was gone! The woman ***was*** healed, and the minister was scared to death. It is sometimes a fearful thing to experience the power of the Spirit at work!

It was that healing power exercised by Peter and John that frightened and posed a problem for the Jewish leaders. There was no way to deny the healing, for the man who had been healed was standing there in front of them. He wasn’t some stranger, imported by the disciples to demonstrate their power as some of the charlatan TV evangelists do. Everyone knew this guy – knew he had been lame since birth, knew that for years he had been unable to stand or walk, knew that no one else including the religious leaders who walked by him every day had been able to cure him. Yet, there he stood, fit as a Phoenician fiddle. How were they to explain that to the crowd? The disciples said they had healed in the name of the risen Christ. How could the leaders deny that power when it seemed to work so well? The crowd was growing, believing, hungry to know more. How were the leaders to stop this swell of support for the message of Jesus?

In the movie *A Few Good Men*, Demi Moore plays a young attorney in a military hearing whose objection is rejected by the court, to which she responds with frustration, “I strenuously object!” as if that were somehow a more convincing objection. The religious leaders adopt a similar plan. They ***sternly*** warn the disciples to stop preaching. One wonders whether they really expected their warning to do any more good than Demi Moore’s strenuous objection, for the boldness of these two itinerant fishermen surprised the authorities. They had assumed they could intimidate them with ecclesiastical power, but that hadn’t worked. Perhaps a stern warning, the threat of dire consequences: *Stop preaching or else!*

Would a threat be enough to keep you from proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ? Such threats have been tried unsuccessfully across the centuries. The church has flourished despite oppression and persecution by those who would silence the message by silencing the messengers. When faced with the threats of the leaders should they fail to keep silent, Peter responds:

*Is it right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God? Judge for yourselves; for, we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.*

Twenty centuries later the issue remains the same, though the threats are more subtle. Can anything keep you from telling the Good News of Jesus to a world in desperate need of good news? Would the threat of persecution silence you, or the threat of ridicule? Are any threats even needed or has apathy born in comfortable prosperity already stilled your voice? When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, it wasn’t with threats of dire consequences, but with offers of fame and fortune. Has your silence been bought with the comforts of home? Can anything keep you from speaking about God’s love in Christ or is the question really: Can anything move you to break your silence and speak about God’s love in Christ?

In a few moments we will sing together:

*The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing!*

*All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?*

*No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging.*

*Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?[[2]](#endnote-2)*

How can we keep from singing with joy

if we truly believe that Jesus Christ is the Resurrection and the life

not only for us but for the world?

How can we keep from speaking the truth about Jesus

if we believe that he came to save all people?

How can we keep from sharing the good news

if we dare to call ourselves Christian?

Too often we have fallen silent. Instead of sharing our faith in Jesus, the hope of resurrection, and the joy of being God’s people, we speak of less significant things, less holy things, less faithful things. We fail to speak out ***against*** injustice or to speak out ***for*** Christ. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the *anesthetizing effect* of stained-glass windows that kept mainline churches silent in the civil rights movement. We have no stained glass in these windows; we have no excuse for failing to lift our voices in joyful praise of God and in bold proclamation of God’s love, mercy, and justice in Jesus Christ. How can we keep from singing God’s praises when we have so much for which to be thankful? How can we keep from telling the story of Jesus and his love if we truly believe what we say we believe? How can we keep from sharing God’s good news if we really believe it is good news? The short answer is this: If we are faithful, **we can’t!** Amen

1. William H. Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts*, John Knox Press:1988, p.50 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Robert Lowry, “How Can I Keep from Singing”, *Sing the Faith*: Hymn 2212 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)