Acts 4:16-20 Legendary 2: *Peter and John: We Cannot Help Speaking*

***Headlines***A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that I am not what I call a headline preacher. My approach is to try to let the Biblical text drive my message, not the current events of the day. There are very few times in over 20 years of preaching when I have interrupted my scheduled sermon in order to talk about something in the news.

And I talked about that a couple of weeks ago because the Covid-19 crisis seemed to necessitate an interruption to my preaching plan and a direct address to current events. For the last couple of months I have done more headline preaching than probably the rest of my career combined.

Once again, it seems as though we are at a critical moment in the history of our country. Once again, current events seem so momentous that it necessitates me stopping what I planned to preach on to address them.

But part of me was still reluctant to do that.

Because I do not feel qualified or equipped to talk about racial inequality in America. I am a middle-aged white man who has lived most of my life in overwhelmingly white communities. I am the pastor of a church that is almost 100% white. That does not excuse me from talking about issues of race, but it highlights the fact that nearly anything I say about the experience of being black in America comes from a place of ignorance.

So a part of me was tempted to just carry on with the sermon schedule. You certainly have enough other opportunities to learn about current events from the news and social media and personal conversations. Maybe the sermon this week could be a break from all of that.

But then I re-read the passage I was planning to preach from this morning, and I realized I could not do that. Because the connections between our story for today and current events are so obvious as to be inescapable.

Our story today is story about protest.

It is a story about civil disobedience.

***Civil Disobedience***We are currently in a series called *Legendary 2****.*** It’s a follow-up to a series we did last summer where we focused on different heroes of the faith. We’re using a comic book theme and the idea of these superheroes of faith to see how Jesus is working through them to be the ultimate hero in the Bible.

Last year, we focused exclusively on Old Testament characters, but this year we thought we would mix in some New Testament characters as well. So today, we are scheduled to look at Peter and John—two of Jesus’ disciples—and a story that takes place in the book of Acts shortly after Jesus went back to heaven. It’s a dramatic story of courageous faith.

And I want to start at the end, at the climactic moment, so you can see how it ties in to current events of today. This is a story about John and Peter being put on trial. They are brought before the Jewish Ruling Authorities—what was known as the Sanhedrin—and they are told—in so many words—to stop speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus. And this is their reply, **Acts 4:19-20:**

19But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! 20As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

This is an act of protest. This is an act of civil disobedience.

The authorities have told them to be quiet. The establishment has told them to shut up and get in line; to stop rocking the boat; to stop advocating for change; and to accept things the way they are. They have even been threatened with imprisonment or worse.

And the reply of the disciples is that they cannot help speaking. They believe the established way of things are is wrong; they believe God is calling them to something different; and so they will not be silent—even at the risk of their own freedom or lives.

When I chose this story to include in this summer’s series, it was because of this moment. The title I am using for my sermon today, from verse 20, “We Cannot Help Speaking,” is the title I chose several weeks ago; before anybody had any idea that there would be two weeks’ worth of protests sweeping across our nation, even in our own town.

I haven’t changed that title. But I hope you can see how it, and these verses, connect to what is happening in our world right now.

***The Story***Let’s back up and give you the story. It’s actually a story that starts at the beginning of Acts 3. It’s a great story, filled with many inspiring moments and great lines, but I’m not going to be able to take you through it verse by verse. I’ll have to summarize; but I encourage you to go back and read it for yourself.

It’s a couple of months after Jesus went back to heaven and the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost. The earliest Christians are all pretty much still living in Jerusalem and they are daily gathering in the courts of the temple. And on one occasion, Peter and John pass by a man who has been crippled from birth and who begs them for money. **Peter says to him**:

**6** “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)

It’s a great line, and an even greater miracle. The man’s feet and ankles become strong and he leaps up and begins to tell everyone that he sees that he has been healed. They recognize him as the man who has been sitting at the temple gate all these years, and they are filled with wonder and amazement.

So, naturally, a crowd of curious onlookers begins to gather. Sensing an opportunity, Peter stands up and begins to preach. He says, essentially, that they think Peter and John have healed this man when, in fact, it was the power of Jesus that allowed him to walk.

Then, in what can only be described as holy boldness, Peter goes on to remind them that they have just recently participated in railroading **Jesus to the cross.** “You killed the author of life,” Peter says, ”but God raised him from the dead.” (Acts 3:15)

In a gutsy performance Peter preaches a sermon about Jesus that leads to a couple thousand more people putting their faith in Christ. (Acts 4:4)

But all this commotion also draws the attention of the Jewish religious authorities. They have Peter and John seized and put them in jail for the night.

The next day Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. Ominously, **we are told that** Annas the high priest is there, as well as Caiaphas. These are men who had leading roles in arranging the death of Jesus, which remember, took place just a few months earlier. Now, **they want to know**, “By what power or what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:7)

The irony of Peter and John being in trouble for showing kindness to a crippled man is not lost on them, and they point it out to their interrogators. **But then they answer the question:**

It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed…

**12**Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:10, 12)

This is extraordinary courage. Again, remember, Peter and John are standing in front of men who have arranged the legal lynching of Jesus. These are men who are highly motivated to see that the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth disappears forever from the pages of history. They thought they had a problem when Jesus was drawing crowds and threatening their power; now there are these men who are preaching in his name and drawing even larger crowds!

Peter and John must have been painfully aware of the pressure to be silent. But they don’t flinch. They don’t back down. Instead they make the exclusive claim that Jesus is the only way to be saved. This isn’t just about healing any more, this is about giving your allegiance to Jesus.

Peter and John are inviting the men who killed Jesus to put their faith in Jesus!

**Verse 13** captures the audaciousness of this moment:

**13**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.

How could these peasants, these sons of fishermen, display so much courage and so much eloquence in the face of such a sophisticated and powerful body?

The council answers its own question: They’ve been with Jesus. They walked with Jesus and listened to Jesus for 3 years and they bore witness to His resurrection and they’ve been filled with the Holy Spirit and now they are willing to stand up in the face of opposition and declare there is no other way to heaven. Jesus has made them bold. Jesus has given them courage.

All of this creates a problem for the Sanhedrin, of course. Again, they represent the establishment. They are the gatekeepers for how things are usually done. They saw Jesus as a threat to the establishment prior to the cross, and they see these followers of Jesus as a threat to the establishment now. So they huddle together, and they decide, that it has to stop. **Verse 18:**

**18**Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

This is the way the powers that be want things to be. The name of Jesus is a problem. The name of Jesus is threatening their power. So they want the name of Jesus to disappear. And this leads to **the moment we looked at earlier:**

19But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! 20As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

If you are like me, you just want to stop and cheer Peter and John at this moment. It is so obvious that they are doing the right thing. God is calling them to spread the name of Jesus. They have been entrusted with the gospel of salvation. If it is a choice between obeying the calling of God or these human authorities, they are going to choose God.

The Bible has a lot to say about respecting human government. **Romans 13**, in particular, says that we should submit to governing authorities. When Paul wrote that, he was talking about a particularly corrupt and secular Roman emperor. The Bible calls us to be good citizens of whatever human country we find ourselves in.

And yet, there are times, and **Acts 4:19-20** sets a precedent, when the commands of government and the commands of God conflict, where Christians are called to follow God and not men. This is civil disobedience. This is protest. This is the conscious decision to break the law, or challenge the law, for a greater good.

There are many examples of where a Christian might be called to do this. Obviously, if there were laws against proclaiming the name of Jesus, or of inviting people to believe in him, we would expect and even encourage civil disobedience. Like Peter and John, we would expect Christians to continue to preach, even at the risk of prison or worse. There are many places on our globe where this is the case.

Christians have also used the example of Acts 4 to practice civil disobedience in relation to laws against prayer in public places. It has also been used by Christians to protest abortion.

And it has been used by those who have spoken up, or marched, or sat in, in response to racial injustice.

Not only is the right to assemble and protest an American value guaranteed in the first amendment; it is also something modeled for us in the Bible.

***Not Wanting to Hear It***Now, I want to show you something in this story that has been incredibly convicting for me. Something that has challenged me to examine my own heart, and my own attitudes. Something that I believe we, as an almost entirely white congregation, in a mostly white community, have to reckon with.

When the Sanhedrin was debating what to do with Peter and John, they had one huge problem: the man who had been healed was standing right in front of them. They had this one piece of irrefutable evidence that the name of Jesus was incredibly powerful. **Verse 14 says**:

**14**But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.

So they send Peter and John out and they go into closed session. **Verse 16 says:**

**16**“What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it.

That’s it then, right? Everybody in Jerusalem knows about the power in Jesus’ name. There’s nothing that can be done to deny it. These religious leaders are going to go out and tell everybody to believe in Jesus, right? It’s clear that there is no other name by which people can be saved. The proof is right before their eyes!

But that’s not what happens. **Verse 17**:

**17**But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

This is astonishing. This doesn’t even make sense! They can see the proof of Jesus’ power, everybody knows about it, so their answer is to make the name of Jesus illegal. This is like saying: “Oh look, there’s smoke billowing up from the basement! Quick! Close the door so we can sit down to dinner.” This is like saying: “Look, people with cancer are being healed by this new drug: quick let’s ban it from the world.”

There is no logic here. And yet, this kind of thinking is all too common in the world.

As I was preparing this message I read a sermon on this passage by John Piper. <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/abortion-shall-we-listen-to-men-or-god> He preached it almost 30 years ago, on Sanctity of Life Sunday. His main point was to encourage Christians to speak out against abortion. And when he came to this decision by the council to ban the name of Jesus, despite undeniable evidence, **he wrote:**

When people are getting some benefit from a wrong, they turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the mounting evidence that they should change.

Friends, when I read that line, I literally stopped what I was doing and stared at my computer. Let me read it again:

When people are getting some benefit from a wrong, they turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the mounting evidence that they should change.

Piper was applying this to abortion, but it is a principle that applies to a lot of situations; including the existence of systemic racism. As I read that line, this week, I couldn’t help asking myself: am I getting some benefit from racism in this country? Do I have a tendency to ignore evidence that things need to change?

Here’s the thing: we read this story and we want to identify with Peter and John. We imagine ourselves as the ones who stand up in defiance of a bad law.

But what if, in this situation, we are more like the Sanhedrin? What if we, as white people in a nearly all white church in a mostly white community, are benefiting from the way things are and so we are more inclined to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to the mounting evidence that we should change? What if we would rather ignore what is right in front of us rather than consider that possibility that there is still a huge problem with race in this country?

Again, I’m a white man with virtually no multi-cultural experience, so I’m not going to try to explain racism to you. I can’t pretend to identify with the pain that is being expressed right now. But I can open my eyes. I can open my ears. I can listen. I can look.

And I can stop making excuses.

And I think that’s my challenge for all of us today. Are you willing to examine what is in your heart with regard to people who look differently than you? Are you willing to examine your attitude to the current protests and ask if you are actually listening to what is being said?

Or are you just making excuses, so that things can stay the way they are? Things that work toward your benefit, whether they are wrong or not?

We have so many excuses for not listening. We say: “I want to hear the message, but I don’t like the way it is being delivered.” Then we proceed to mute the cries for equal justice by turning it into a debate about kneeling during the anthem or arguing about whether it should be All Lives Matter instead of Black Lives Matter.

We say: “I can see why black people are upset, but these protests just lead to violence.” Obviously, people who use protests as excuses for violence and looting are very wrong. It should not happen. But just because some protests have turned violent should not be an excuse for us to tune out what is being protested. I’ve mentioned abortion a couple of times. Some have resorted to violence in their protest against abortion. Doctors have been shot. Clinics have been bombed. None of us would say that is O.K. And yet, many of us would still maintain that protests against abortion are appropriate and that the message of protecting the unborn must still be heard.

We say: “The cops I know are good people. Supporting the protesters means turning our backs on them.” Please hear me, I have immense respect for anyone who chooses to be a police officer. We have police officers in our congregation, and I love them all. I believe that nearly every person in this country who enters law enforcement does so with a desire to protect and serve. But having good people in policing does not change the possibility that there is something wrong with our system of law enforcement. 13% of the American population is black, and yet 40% of those incarcerated in the U.S. are black. There is an inequality there.

The men of the Sanhedrin council had the evidence of the power of Jesus right in front of them. They could not refute it. They could not challenge it. And yet, they chose to ignore it.

Two weeks ago, we had the evidence of racial inequality thrust in front us in a 9-minute videotape that showed a knee pressed into the neck of George Floyd. Again and again he said he could not breathe. He cried for his mother. Bystanders attempted to intervene while police officers used the power of their badge to keep them back. For the final 3 minutes George Floyd was entirely motionless, and yet the knee remained.

Since then we have heard story after story of black Americans who experience suspicion, persecution and sometimes violence simply because they are black.

The question is: are we going to examine our own racial prejudices and attitudes? Are we going consider the things that we say and the things that we post and the way they might contribute to ongoing injustice? Are we going to speak up when we hear racist comments or witness racist actions?

Or are we going to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear, despite the mounting evidence that things need to change?