

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Daring Testimony

1 John 3:16-24
Acts 4:5-12

Rev. Galen E. Russell III
May 3, 2009

“By what power or by what name did you do this?”

Prayer: Ever-speaking God, may each of sense the power of your word in our mind and our spirits today. Amen.

“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before” (Prologue to “Star Trek” television series). [whistle the tune.]

Yeah... I’m excited to see the new Star Trek movie. It takes us back to the origins of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock and all the rest. The movie comes out this week... May 8th I believe it will be out around here.

Seems to me that our text from the book of Acts takes us back to the origins of Christianity. The gospel writer Luke who also wrote the book “The Acts of the Apostles,” could have opened his book with these words: *Faith: the spiritual frontier. These are the journeys of the Christian apostles. Their continuing mission: to do good in the name of Jesus Christ in strange new lands, to seek out*

May 2009 Sermons

new disciples and new places to proclaim the good news of God found in Jesus Christ, to boldly go where no faith has gone before! [whistle the tune]

Let's not kid ourselves, folks. Our Christian predecessors Peter and John did have to go boldly because they were among just a handful of dedicated people who passionately believed in the power of God in the name of Jesus Christ. They were proclaiming that in Jesus there is resurrection of the dead. They healed the lame man and proclaimed that faith in the name of Jesus healed him and made him strong.

But, they faced serious opposition by the same religious leaders who tried Jesus and handed him over to be crucified. Did these names sound familiar? Caiaphas, who by this time had stepped down from his position of high priest but still served on the Council. Annas, who was on the Council at Jesus' trial had now become the high priest, and John (or Jonathan) and Alexander, of the high-priestly family, were also on the Council. Because of the message of resurrection and saving grace one can find in Jesus and because Peter and John were instrumental in the healing of the lame man, the Council had temple guards arrest Peter and John. Then the next day, the Council brought them out and questions them about healing the lame man: "By what power or by what name did you do this?"

Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, proclaims with daring testimony that the

May 2009 Sermons

man was healed in the name of Jesus Christ, and how in Jesus, one can find salvation. Peter boldly goes where no one has gone before—proclaiming the healing and saving power of God in Christ Jesus to the chief priests, the elders, rulers, and the scribes.

We don't see this kind of bravado in Christians very much anymore. There isn't that much advocacy for boldly living a new life that follows God's ways instead of human ways. We prefer, I think, to live as we always have lived, with what is familiar, what is comfortable, not rocking the boat. But sometimes, the boat needs to get rocked because a practice or a current situation takes us away from God's ways, God's way of justice, of healing, of love expressed in truth and action. Sometimes it takes daring testimony to get at God's ways in the midst of the mind-numbing conventionality.

Some of you will remember Joe Robinson as our guest speaker at the April Community Forum. He told a story of Martin Luther King Jr. saying that Dr. King was instrumental in getting President Johnson to sign the Civil Rights bill in the sixties, and Dr. King and many of his followers rejoiced. But three years later, the issue of the Vietnam War was in the forefront of American society, and Dr. King spoke out against the war. Many of Dr. King's aides complained of his daring testimony, "What are you doing? We got the Civil Rights bill passed. Don't rock

May 2009 Sermons

the boat. Don't oppose President Johnson on the war now. Let's give a little to keep what we got." But, Dr. King disagreed and boldly said essentially what is wrong is wrong, underscoring his statement that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (M. L. King, Jr. in his letter from the Birmingham Jail, 1963, http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Martin_Luther_King_Jr./, retrieved, May 2, 2009).

We say we believe in Jesus, we say we understand Jesus' command to love one another, but... we often seem to have a 'but!' We often have a contingency, a qualifier, an exception to the command. "... but, I can't love the one who does evil. I can't love the one who doesn't think like me. Surely, Jesus did not intend for me to love terrorists, child abusers, men haters, women haters, flag burners, malicious people, even our adversaries, our opponents, our nemeses." Jesus did intend for us to love, even when its difficult.

When I was in seminary, I had the opportunity to learn from one of the guest professors at Pacific School of Religion, Dr. Kosuke Koyama, who taught for one summer there. I learned yesterday that on March 25th, Dr. Koyama died in Springfield, Massachusetts. Former Union Theological Seminary President Dr. Donald Shriver paid tribute to Dr. Koyama by recalling how Dr. Koyama spoke of his baptism that took place in Japan in the middle of World War II. The pastor of

May 2009 Sermons

the congregation who baptized Kosuke said these daring words to him, “Kosuke, God calls you in Jesus Christ to love all your neighbors, even the Americans.” Bold words in the middle of World War II, wouldn’t you say? (“Japanese Theologian Kosuke Koyma, *The Christian Century*, May 5, 2009, p. 19).

1 John urges the Christian to love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. Let us hope that the spirit of these words becomes the order of the day. Our only hope in the face of our societal calamities and our global woes is for people of faith to recapture the boldness that we see exhibited by the original Christians, not just by speaking the truth about God’s ways, but by living them as well. There’s more that is expected of us when we have the living spirit of Christ in our hearts. More than just talk. We are extensions of the work and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Not like the day a Salvation Army group was giving its testimony on a street corner. The man playing the bass drum was asked to speak. “Well,” he “began, before I was converted, I led a wild life. I drank all the time, I caroused on the weekends, I gambled away every paycheck. But since I’ve been converted,” he said, and then paused for a moment, “all I do is beat this darn drum” (How to Keep Laughing, ed. Richard Deats (Nyack, N.Y.: Fellowship Publications, 1994), as cited in Martin E. Marty, *Context*, 15 February 1995, found at

May 2009 Sermons

http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=Testimony, retrieved May 2, 2009).

There's more to us and our faith than just beating a drum! God is still speaking truth to us, and we are still speaking God's truth to others, even in the face of adversity, but speaking the truth is far less effective than living what we believe. What we believe is what we do. To believe in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is to do justice in the name of Jesus and justice means acting in ways so that everyone has enough. Our daring testimony is in our actions, not so much in our words.

I recently read of a man named Andrew who feeds homeless people on Saturday mornings. He sets up a portable kitchen on a sidewalk, makes breakfast for people who live on the streets. He serves coffee to his homeless friends, talks with them, sometimes prays with them (*Homiletics*, May 2009, p. 10-11). His effectiveness is much more in his actions, not in his words. It comes with his connection to Christ. His testimony is God's justice being done in his actions

May we have such a daring testimony. May our effectiveness as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ come with our bold proclamation that we are under the power of the living God, in whose name we do our work. May we find opportunities to do good in the name of Jesus Christ in strange new places, to seek

May 2009 Sermons

out new disciples and new ways to proclaim the good news of God found in Jesus Christ, to boldly go in action where we have not gone before. By what power and in what name do we do this? We do this ministry in the power and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.