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Acts 4:5-12

Living Together: Prayer

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Acts 4:5-12 Common English Bible

The next day the leaders, elders, and legal experts gathered in Jerusalem, along with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others from the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and asked, “By what power or in what name did you do this?”

Then Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, answered, “Leaders of the people and elders, are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person, a good deed that healed him? If so, then you and all the people of Israel need to know that this man stands healthy before you because of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is the stone you builders rejected; he has become the cornerstone! Salvation can be found in no one else. Throughout the whole world, no other name has been given among humans through which we must be saved.”

Have you ever heard a Bible verse taken out of context? One of my favorite examples is “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I’m there with them” in Matthew 18:20. People usually say those words when a small group has gathered, and you are worshipping or praying together. We usually mean that it doesn’t matter how large a group is when we gather together, God is there with us. But those words are in a passage about conflict and how to resolve it.  “If your brother or sister sins against you, go and correct them when you are alone together… if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses.” (Matthew 18:15-16).

In our scripture passage for today we will hear a verse that has been taken out of context. There are two Bible verses that are most often cited when people are talking about Christian exclusivity. We hear it at the end of our scripture reading, “Salvation can be found in no one else. Throughout the whole world, no other name has been given among humans through which we must be saved.” The other verse is in John 14:6 where Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

When we look at our scripture passage, we have to remember that Peter was speaking to the Sanhedrin, this is the supreme Jewish legislative and judicial court. Peter is talking to the authorities in his own religious tradition and defending himself within his own family of faith. Peter and John had been arrested by the Sadducees who wanted to put an end to Peter and John teaching the people and proclaiming that in the name of Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, and not only are Peter and John talking about it, they also healed a man in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Peter and John are a danger to the peace in Jerusalem, and the Sadducees are responsible for keeping that peace. The Sadducees are supposed to make sure large crowds of Jews don’t form, and people keep gathering to listen to Peter talk about Jesus.

I love what Peter does to defend himself. He reframes the charge against him. This week I went on the annual clergywomen’s retreat. I had so much fun with my women pastor friends! One of the things that we did was to write down negative things that people had said about us as women pastors that we still carried with us. People wrote things like, “Too loud,” “Too young,” “Too old,” or “Too emotional.” Someone wrote that they had been in jail, and I am very curious because I don’t know who wrote that and I want to hear that story! We put those negative thoughts that we still carried with us in the middle and then we took ones that other people had written and we had to reframe it. So, to the person that had written, “Too loud,” I reframed it as “everyone can hear you.” To the person who had written, “Too young,” I wrote, “you have fresh eyes.” To the person who had written, “Too old,” I wrote, “you have the wisdom of experience.” To the person who had written, “Too emotional,” I wrote, “you can be vulnerable and honest about your emotions.” In our scripture today Peter reframes, too. He does this by saying, “are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person, a good deed that healed him? If so, then you and all the people of Israel need to know that this man stands healthy before you because of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene.”

Something good has been done to someone who was sick. He and John did an act of kindness. What is the big deal? Of course they had not done it under their own power, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter then challenges their view of scripture by citing Psalm 118:22, The stone rejected by the builders is now the main foundation stone!” and saying that Jesus has fulfilled it. The interesting thing about Jesus is that Jesus was willing to lie wherever God placed him and Jesus trusted God to use him well.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Through all of this defense, Peter trusts that he does not stand alone. Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter is willing to be where God places him and Peter trusts God to use him well. One of the ways that God uses us well is when we are there for one another. We get stuck and we help each other to see God’s perspective. I was visiting with an old friend this week who is really struggling. We started talking about all the ways that God is moving in her life and I asked her what she is thankful to God for. She said she got up that morning, she had clothes, she had a place to sleep, she had food to eat. I grabbed her hand, and I looked her in the eyes and I said, “and you have a friend who you can talk to who loves you, and who prays for you everyday.” When we reach out to one another, when we trust each other, we are reminded that we are not alone.

When we share what it going on in our lives in a real, honest, vulnerable way, we are praying with one another and for one another, and we can help each other when we are stuck, we can help each other see God’s perspective. We have to be open to see how God reframes the bad in our lives, and God uses other people to help us see the good that is all around us. When we pray, we focus on God and God’s love for us.

When my dad remarried I did not like my stepmom. I had no good reason, I didn’t like her simply because she was my stepmom. I remember being a surly teenager and my stepmom told me that she prayed for me every day. How could I hate someone who prayed for me? I couldn’t. As we live into this Easter season and we talk about how we can live together better, I wonder if we can become better at being open with others about our struggles. Peter teaches us how to reframe, so that when people are sharing their struggles with us we can shine a light on all the ways that God is moving. In our scripture the Holy Spirit is inspiring Peter, and the Holy Spirit can inspire us. The last thing Jesus says before he ascends to heaven is “You will be my witnesses” to “the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Living together better means being kinder, more loving, more compassionate. Only when we are honest with one another, can we practice kindness and love and compassion. When we open ourselves up to others, then we can listen to one another and be there for one another and pray for one another. Prayer has this amazing ability to change us from the inside out.

We may get hung up on the idea that we aren’t sure if we are doing prayer right. How do we pray, how can we be better at prayer, how do we listen for God? Prayer is about a yearning that we have to be in relationship with God, a dream to make our world better. We have a desire to desperately want to fix what is broken, and so we pray. When I pray with someone, I always ask if it is okay that we pray together. In my 18 years of being a United Methodist pastor, I have only been turned down once, and I have prayed with a lot of people. Praying with someone is an act of trust, it is acknowledging our need before God and before one another. It is so easy for us to say that we are fine, when we aren’t. It is hard to be open and honest and vulnerable about what is going on in our lives and where we need help.

When we pray for ourselves or for one another, we are reframing what is going on in our lives, and we realize that we are not alone because God is with us and we are all here for one another. I think that’s why I love church so much. I come to this place and I say that I need you. I need your help to be a better daughter, I need your help to be a better sister, I need your help to be a better mother, I need your help to be a better wife, I need your help to be a better pastor, I need your help to be a better follower of Jesus. And sometimes I need someone else to say, why are you being so hard on yourself? Our scripture teaches me that different people are going to interpret the same event in different ways. For some people the healing in Jesus’ name brought wonder and excitement, but for others it brought suspicion and anger. When I think that everything is going wrong and I can’t see any way out, I need other people to remind me that there is hope.

Prayer for us as Christians is like breathing and when we pray we breathe in the Holy Spirit. We have learned from the early church that living together better means increasing our generosity, it means increasing our willingness to forgive others and ourselves, and it means praying more. Praying more for others, praying more for ourselves, and as we pray always remembering that the good news of Jesus Christ of Nazareth means that we are never alone. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Taylor, Barbara Brown. Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 2. P. 435. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)