

“The Risks and Blessings of Outreach”—Acts 4:1-4

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “The Risks and Blessings of Outreach”, is Acts 4:1-4 → *As Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

You are in worship service on a typical Sunday morning. You’re singing, “Let us ever walk with Jesus, Follow His example pure . . . Let us gladly die with Jesus, Since by death He conquered death.” All at once six men, armed with machine guns, come bursting into the sanctuary. They fire a round of ammo into the ceiling and order the organist to stop playing and, frightened, the organist stops playing. The worshipers start to panic, not knowing what will happen next or what they’ll do to them.

Another round goes into the ceiling as the men yell, “Shut up! Or be

shut up!” Silence falls across the room as the worshipers stand there in fear. All kinds of thoughts go through your head: “What do they want? What are they going to do to us? Am I going to get killed?”

They instruct the people sitting in the front pew to stand in the front of the church in a straight line. It looks like a “firing squad” line. While five of the men stand guard at various spots in the sanctuary one man points his machine gun at the people standing in line. They cringe as the gun moves past them.

“Those of you who believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior stay right where you are! Those of you who don’t believe in Jesus, go stand over in that corner!” he growled, pointing his gun to an empty corner in the sanctuary. Out of the seven people standing there, only one person stayed.

Your thoughts are racing in fright: “What’s he gonna do? I can’t look!” You cover your eyes and jump when you hear the sound of the machine gun rattle the man to the floor. Tears come to your eyes as your world stops in fear, thinking about what you’re going to do.

“Let us gladly die with Jesus, since by death He conquered death. We were just singing these words with such confidence,” you think to yourself. “Am I going to die today?” Your thoughts continue to haunt you as you watch these men deal with your fellow believers pew by pew.

What would you do if you found yourself in this situation? Believe me,

stranger things have happened in the places of Christian worship over the centuries into our present day. This could possibly happen in your lifetime. If you were in this situation would you stay standing in the front of the sanctuary or would you go to the corner? Maybe it would be easy for us to say we'd stay up front when we don't have a machine gun barrel pointed up our nose. However, it would be very easy under that fear to go into the corner.

There are risks involved with being a disciple of Jesus which range from rejection to dying, all a result of persecution. While we may avoid considering scenarios such as these, history is filled with descriptions of the persecution of Christians which make this scenario look tame. Yet, the concept of dying for Jesus should not be a stranger to you since you confessed at one time publicly in your confirmation vows that you would suffer all, **even death**, rather than turn away from the Christian faith.

While Jesus' disciples, Peter and John, were proclaiming Jesus to be the Christ to those worshiping at the temple in Jerusalem, *the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them. (verse 1) Then they arrested them and put them in custody. (verse 3) Why? They were greatly annoyed because these men were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. (verse 2)* This was only the beginning of constant persecution which these men would face, eventually leading Peter to be crucified upside down and

John to be exiled to an island where he died—all for the name of Jesus.

This behavior was not a surprise to Peter and John. Jesus had told them in John 15:20 → *A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.* He told them to *beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues (i.e. like churches in our day), and you will be dragged before governors and kings for My sake.* (cf. Matthew 10:17-18) Peter himself wrote to Christians: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you* (cf. 1 Peter 4:12)—and then proceeded to talk about being persecuted for belonging to Christ. Persecution in some way is an inevitable risk of reaching out with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why are there risks involved with sharing Jesus with people? Along with the fact *that the wickedness of man is great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually* (Genesis 6:5), *the god of this world (i.e. satan) has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.* (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4) However, it is still such people who need to hear the message of God's forgiveness of sins in the Person and Work of Jesus. Thus, the heart of the sinner will resist God's will in Jesus and will come to repentance and faith in Jesus **only after much struggle and conviction by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word.** As

we bring that Word we will meet that struggle and conviction in very physical, emotional and painful ways.

This is why perseverance is so important in outreach. Too often the church sees outreach much like a fast food restaurant. You drive up, make our order, pay and pick up your food while you drive through, and go on your way—all without having to be inconvenienced, with as little investment of time and energy as possible. Likewise, we may encounter someone briefly, strive to share the Gospel with him while on our way to our next activity and may never strive to engage that person again. Perseverance is willing to enter the struggle of sin with that person to bring God's Word to bear upon their life. Galatians 6:2 says it this way: *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

Notice, however, the blessings of outreach in the name of Jesus according to verse 4 of our text: *But . . .* It is important to pay attention to God's "buts." They tell you that God has done or is going to do something else to bring about His blessing in our lives, even in the midst of persecution and suffering. Peter had pointed out God's "but" in his sermons constantly telling them that they killed Jesus **but** God raised Him from the dead. In our text it says: ***But** many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.* The blessings in the midst of their outreach with the Gospel of Jesus was more people believing in Jesus Christ through *the Word of*

God proclaimed!

Promise after promise of our Almighty God is fulfilled as the Holy Spirit works through His Word proclaimed to sinners to create faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Yahweh says His Word *that goes out from His mouth . . . shall not return to Him empty, but it shall accomplish that which He purposes, and shall succeed in the thing for which He sent it.* (cf. Isaiah 55:11) Hebrews 4:12 describes God's Word as *living and active . . . discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart* as the Holy Spirit works conviction of sin and repentance in our heart through it!

This is why taking the risk to speak to other specifically about their need for forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus is so important. Romans 10:17 says *faith comes from **hearing**, and **hearing** through the word of Christ*. Certainly not every proclamation of *the word of Christ* to others will be well received immediately. The struggle in sin is never easy, whether it was for the *five thousand* who believed in Peter's day or the one person who believes as a result of your speaking the Word to him or her. In fact, you may not see the results of the blessings of faith in Jesus during your earthly lifetime. Paul even spoke about people *being baptized on behalf of the dead* (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:29)—that is, people came to faith and were baptized into the name of Jesus based upon the witness of Christians who had already died! **The Holy Spirit will work through *the word of Christ* you proclaim in His way, in His time!**

The risks and blessings of outreach with the Gospel of Jesus Christ are bound up in the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word. Jesus even revealed this to His disciples in Matthew 10:18-20. He told them: *You will be dragged before governors and kings for My sake, **to bear witness before them and the Gentiles**. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. **For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you**.* That's His promise to you in the risks and blessings of outreach! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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