

SLD05.07.06 Fourth Easter
EPC
Acts 4:5-12, I John 3:16-24
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How Far Will You Go?

Our story today from the Acts of the Apostles is really just a continuation of last Sunday's story. You recall, Peter and John were heading up to the Temple in Jerusalem about 3:00 in the afternoon when they noticed this fellow who's been lame from birth being carried in and set down at the Gate called Beautiful. His friends set him there at the Gate everyday so he can beg from worshippers going in and out of the Temple.

And you remember that Peter heals the fellow in a dramatic moment when he declares, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk!" And the fellow *does* stand up and walk, and not just walk, but leap around in exultation and delight. The folks standing by can hardly believe their eyes. Which is when Peter gets all high and mighty with the crowd, giving them endless grief about...a) being surprised at the power of God and b) killing the Son of God in the first place.

And we talked last week about how ironic it was for Peter to get so uppity, given his own behavior both before and after Jesus' crucifixion. But we noted that after all, Peter's only human and so are we, and we all know how much effort following Jesus Christ can take. I mean, if you *really* commit to it.

Well, in today's text from Acts, the story goes on, with the stakes getting raised regarding just how far Peter is willing to go for his faith. You see, while Peter and John were speaking to the people hanging around the temple, up

come the priests, and the captain of the temple (that'd be like the moderator of the Session), and the Sadducees (read, elders) and they're mad. They're annoyed with Peter and John's presumption to teach holy truths, and they're mad that one of them is about the resurrection of the dead, which the Sadducees don't believe. So the Sadducees arrest Peter and John and put them in jail. Okay, so then this is what happened:

Acts 4:5-12

So you can see how the stakes are raised now for Peter and John Before they were just lecturing and admonishing a bunch of "peers," if you will – nobody with any more power than they had. Speaking their faith to a bunch of lay people on the temple steps wasn't really all that risky.

But now the big guns have shown up and that moves Peter and John onto shakier ground. "Y'all lose," announces Peter to the religious authorities with conviction. The stone that *y'all* rejected, (that is, Jesus Christ) " he says, "has now become the cornerstone of faith, and y'all flat lose. 'Cause salvation isn't available through anyone else under heaven!"

Now Peter's gone too far with his faith, at least if he plans to keep his freedom and all his body parts. Now he's making enemies in high places. And, sure enough, it isn't long before the high priest comes up with some other reason to lock up the apostles. Eventually they get out and preach some more. And the high priest yells some more. And the tension escalates until the temple authorities have had enough and want to off Peter altogether. Somebody persuades them not to kill Peter but just to give the whole crew a good flogging.

Which they do. And so it goes until finally, as legend, if not scripture, has it, Peter gets crucified upside down in Rome. Peter goes a long way for his faith. Lays down his life for it. And he was by no means the only one.

Why, just two chapters later, the Apostle Stephen pulls the same stunt, passionately and publicly lecturing to the authorities about his conviction that Israel's whole holy history was leading up to the true Messiah, Jesus Christ. Only this time the priests and Sadducees don't fool around with overnights in the tank or public floggings – they just stoned Stephen to death. Stephen lays down his life for his faith, too.

A lot of those early disciples went so far as literally to lay down their lives for Jesus. 'Course, it wasn't as easy back to be a Christian as it is now, at least in many places. Back then, before Christianity became a state church under the Emperor Constantine in the 4th century, following Jesus Christ wasn't nearly so benign as it often seems today. Of course, the holy history of Christianity since the 4th century is a roller coaster ride that reveals Christians now as the oppressed, now as the oppressors. But now, at least in this country, most of us mainstream protestants today don't consider our faith as particularly power-taking or power-giving; certainly not life-threatening; maybe not even life-giving.

Many of us were just born into our faith, right? And we're following the patterns of our childhood. Plus it feels good to belong to a community, to worship someplace people know your name, and provide caring company on the journey of life. Church is like extended family, at least *this* church is. It's one of our gifts.

‘Course, church can take a lot out of us, too – ask any active elder, or anyone else who keeps getting sucked into the endless work and busyness of the church. A lot of us lay down at least a part of our lives today for Jesus by pitching in and supporting the worship and the programs and fellowship and mission of the church. Serving on Session, chairing a committee or volunteering for the Fall Festival are some of the ways our lives today testify to our faith in Jesus Christ, aren’t they? And I find, when we put our minds and hearts and pocketbooks to it, that we’re good at getting things done in this church.

But what with not one, but all *three*, of today’s lectionary texts speaking to the centrality of a faithfulness to Christ Jesus Christ so bold and so total that it presses clear to the very edge of a disciple’s life breath, well, somehow “getting things done” doesn’t seem...I don’t know...quite adequate somehow. Or complete. Or fully enough engaged. *Something*. I mean, I know nobody in this country is going to beat us up and throw us in jail for being Christian but somehow it seems like as followers of Jesus Christ we’re being called to something a little more on the edge than competence or project management.

Listen again to today’s passage from the gospel of John (10:11-18):
Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ...For this reason the Father loves me,” says Jesus, “because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down *of my own accord*.”

Is what you or I do for the church, what we offer in terms of energy or time or money or relationship, do we lay it down of our own accord? What’s behind

our investment in this community? Is it a love of God, a commitment to Christ Jesus, or is it...a sense of duty. Or habit. Or guilt.

I mean, here we are witnessing Peter, John and Stephen taking bold, extraordinary, even stupid risks in order to testify to their faith, to embody it, to live it out, “for we can not keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” says Peter in Acts 4:20. Do you ever feel that way about your faith?

Then we hear the words of the sweet John, kind John, compassionate John, the epistle writer I always imagined I'd like if we met, who remarks in his gentle, even but straightforward manner, “friends, we know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.”

There it is again. All three of today's texts, each in its own inescapable way, seem to convict us latter day, comfortable, competent, productive Christians. But that's not the point. That's *never* the point! Never *God's* point, anyway. Nor the gospel's. In fact, John himself makes a purposeful end-run in today's text to cut short just that kind of thinking, reminding us that God doesn't condemn us *even when our own hearts do*.

It almost sounds like John is anticipating the pangs of conscience among middle-class congregations that, as C. Clifton Black says, “feel sucked into the vortex of upward mobility and guilt for their affluence?”¹ Or is John's word of solace that “God is greater than our hearts, and knows everything, and forgives everything, and redeems everything,” meant to be heard by disciples of every age and era who feel unable to meet the demands of the gospel?

¹ **The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol XII, C. Clifton Black, I John, p. 423.**

“Little children,” starts John. Now he’s talking to a crowd of grown-ups but he knows what we’re all *really* like before the gospel. “Little children,” he says. “Let me boil it down this way: let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Let us love in truth and action.

And to me, the “action” part is easy to understand – don’t just talk about it, *do* it, right? And in my opinion, that’s what you and I at Emory Church have down pretty well. I’d say we’re pretty darn good doers. You and I, we’re intentional about loving with action - with our presence and our hands and our ideas and our resources, with our problem-solving and our sharing and our caring. We’re good at that.

But loving in action *and in truth*? The “truth” part may be our growing edge. I mean, we’re good doers, you and I, but what drives what we do for the church? What’s behind what we offer in terms of energy and resources and relationship? What truth fuels our commitment to one another and to our community? Whatever part of our lives we lay down for Jesus Christ, why do we lay it down? I mean, why *is* it we go to so much trouble to keep on being church, anyway?

I have a feeling a good number of us might have a have a hard time answering that question, and I’ll tell you how I know.

Many of you are aware that our Session attended a retreat this Friday night and Saturday. Well, the retreat was led by our Presbytery Executive, Ed Albright, and focused entirely on what’s called “Natural Church Development,” a particular method of examining the strengths and weaknesses of a church. The

Natural Church Development approach is based on research keyed to a questionnaire sent to 1000 churches of differing denominations in 52 countries on 5 continents and yielding 4.2 million responses. That was back in '96. Since then the study has grown to include responses from over 20,000 churches.

And what that study shows is that there are 8 key characteristics that pervade healthy, growing churches. 8 principles of operation, if you will, that invariably undergird healthy, growing communities of faith. Now, I'm going to run through right quick what those 8 characteristics are, but don't worry about remembering them – we'll all be hearing a lot more about them in the coming months. The eight characteristics, or operative principles of healthy, growing churches are: Empowering Leadership, Gift-oriented Ministry, Passionate Spirituality, Functional Structures, Inspiring Worship Services, Holistic Small Groups, Need-Oriented Evangelism, and Loving Relationships. Okay, long list, new words, forget about it. You'll get more later.

Okay. Well, that same questionnaire that went to 30 people in each of 20,000 churches? About a month and a half ago, we sent it out to 30 people in this church. And at our Session retreat this weekend we got to learn the results of what *you* said about where we stand here at Emory Church on those eight characteristics.

Now I want you to know that we did real good on a lot of them – we've got a lot to be proud of here at this church; a lot to build on. But guess where you said this community need the most attention. Guess which of the eight principles

at Emory Church needs the most shoring up, the most energy and options and support poured into it: passionate spirituality.

Passionate spirituality. Isn't that interesting? Not program. Not fellowship. Not worship or music. Not even mission. But passionate spirituality. That same intimate, personal, authentic engagement with God, that same genuine transformative relationship with Jesus Christ, that same individual and communal experience of the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, that was experienced by Peter and Stephen and all the other apostles – in fact by every convicted follower of Jesus Christ in every age.

Passionate spirituality. It's what so many of us hunger for *and*, I fear, what may be missing in too many of our task-oriented activities. What really draws us into the body of Christ to feed and be fed is the transforming Bread of Heaven. the renewing Cup of Salvation.

Peter had a full belly full of both, which is why he couldn't quit belching the good news about Jesus Christ. Stephen ate so much he simply turned into the Bread and Cup and let himself be eaten. And while the time is past for literal martyrdom for most of us, both the hunger and the satisfaction of passionate spirituality remains every bit as compelling, motivating and nurturing for us today, at least when we're willing to go far enough into our faith to experience it.

Sure we're all smart and competent but how long can that drive what we do for the church until we just burn out? We got some seriously good project managers among us but just how far can the satisfaction of a job well-done go before it becomes...well...just another job. If you and I decided entirely to let go

entirely of all motivation of guilt and duty, what would be left? (Which, incidentally, please don't do yet until we can replace it with something better.) But if we did, what would be our fuel then? Scary question.

Now we don't have the answer yet for how best to nurture passionate spirituality in this church. Nor is passionate spirituality the only challenge to emerge from our work this weekend. But it's sure a clear priority! So we on Session are committed to journey together to explore just what passionate spirituality is, what we yearn for ourselves, and how we can provide supportive conditions for everyone seeking it. We intend to open ourselves to whatever guidance God sends us, including your thoughts and ideas.

And with God's help, in a year or two, who knows? Maybe when somebody asks you why you lay your life down with and for the life Jesus Christ, well, maybe you'll have a clearer, and more passionate answer. Depending, of course, on how far on the journey you're willing to go.

To the glory of God. Amen.