

It's Okay to be Bold - Acts 4:13-22

Norwalk Christian Church, May 25, 2019, Eastertide 6 (non-lectionary) Year C

It might seem that I am contradicting my sermon from last week. Last week, I said that it was okay to change your mind. I still stand by that. But maybe during the week, I did change my mind a little bit. It is okay to change your mind--but sometimes, sometimes you need to hold firm. Steadfast.

We've been reading together on Sundays different parts of the Book of Acts as we journey from Easter to Pentecost, reading these stories of the early church who risked so much to follow Jesus.

Our story this morning comes from the early part of Acts. Peter and John are fresh from the Day of Pentecost. We joined in the midst of the story, after the big event. The day before, in Acts 3, Peter and John go to the temple. As they enter a gate of the temple called The Beautiful Gate, there is a lame man there, lame from birth. For forty years, he never walked, and for most of those years he laid outside the temple begging. Worshippers would throw him some coins, and that is how he lived.

And as Peter and John pass by, he asks them for money. And Peter replies, one of my most favorite verses in the book of Acts, "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." Peter takes him by the right hand, and the man jumps up, and follows them into the temple leaping and praising God.

Everyone sees the miracle. Everyone knows who this guy is. They've passed him all their adult life. And it causes a bit of a stir.

Peter and John start preaching in the temple about Jesus--about how the religious leaders crucified him, but that he rose from the dead three days later. And the religious leaders have enough. The text says they were annoyed at Peter and John, so they have them arrested.

But they have a problem. They, too, see this lame-from-birth-man walking around. They can't deny the miracle and they're fearful of Peter and John organizing the people against them, but they can't allow this Jesus-talk to continue. They are weak. They can't be bold, for boldness might threaten their power. So they deny the evidence in front of them.

They let Peter and John go, but only after threatening them. Don't speak about Jesus again, they say. No more of this resurrection talk.

But that's not going to work for Peter. He had shut up about Jesus once before, denied he ever knew him. But not anymore. Not today.

So Peter and John look Power in the face and speak truth to that Power with boldness.

We cannot help but speak about what we have seen and heard. No one is going to shut them up.

Reading the story, I thought what better scripture for us to reflect on today than this one.

On this day when we honor the lives of those who boldly fought for their country, not wavering in their commitment, making the ultimate sacrifice. On this day when we honor our graduates, as you step out into this world making bold decisions for you life, standing on your own, following your plans and dreams.

As you take all the lessons you have learned from your parents, your family, your church, your school--all your life experiences thus far--and you go out and put them to the test.

On some things, you will change your mind. But when it comes to who you are--to your core beliefs, your character, your sense of justice and right and wrong--on these things, you will be bold and steadfast.

It's okay to take a stand for what you believe in. It's okay to hold something so close, at the center of who you are, that you will not let anyone shake it from you.

Learn, grow, expand your world--but be bold in your truth. Don't let anyone take away your character and your understanding of God's unconditional love for you.

When I think of boldness, I think of Harriet Tubman. She has been in the news lately, a feat for someone who died in 1913. Tubman was born into slavery, escaped, then returned 13 times to the South in slave-holding territory to sneak out over 70 slaves, risking her life every time.

Because of her bravery, and her unwavering commitment to the Abolitionist cause, she has been seen as the example of courage and boldness. She was nicknamed "Moses" for her efforts. She even fought for the union army, as a scout and spy. She was the first woman to lead an armed expedition in the war, an expedition that ended up freeing 700 slaves.

Last week, she made news again when the Treasury Secretary announced that he was indefinitely delaying the plan years in the works to put her face on the \$20. An artist in New York has made a stamp, by the way, of her portrait that you can stamp on top of Andrew Jackson's in a bit of a protest.

On the screen is an old, iconic portrait of Tubman. This is how we have known her. That is, until two months ago. Though her portrait may not be on the \$20 bill anytime soon, an actual portrait of her, a much younger Moses, was just discovered.

“Suddenly, there was a picture of Harriet Tubman as a young woman, and as soon as I saw it I was stunned,” so says a grinning Lonnie Bunch, founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. He’s the one who discovered the portrait of Tubman contained in an 1860s-era photography album belonging to abolitionist Emily Howland.

“All of us had only seen images of her at the end of her life. She seemed frail. She seemed bent over, and it was hard to reconcile the images of Moses leading people to freedom,” Bunch explains. “But then when you see this picture of her, probably in her early 40s, taken about 1868 or 1869 . . . there’s a stylishness about her. And you would have never had me say to somebody ‘Harriet Tubman is stylish.’”

“There’s a youthful exuberance. There is a sense that you could actually look at that picture and say, ‘Now I understand that this woman was tough and resilient.’ A picture like that...,” Bunch says, “reminds people that someone like Harriet Tubman was an ordinary person who did extraordinary things. So, this means you too can change the world...”

Peter and John. Harriet “Moses” Tubman. They were ordinary people. The religious leaders recognized that Peter and John were “uneducated, ordinary men.” Yet they changed the world because of their boldness.

Because boldness, doesn’t come from up here [head]. It comes from here [heart]. From your core--from who you are, what you believe in, and what you will stand up for.

Look around today, you can see a lot of people going with the flow, compromising their character and beliefs in exchange for power and success. But that’s not all that’s out there. Everywhere, there are Harriets and Peters—people standing up, being bold in the face of power. Dreaming big. Not backing down. Changing the world with their courage.

Those are the people who win--those are the people who shape the world--those are the stories we will keep telling over and over again. It’s okay to be bold. Indeed, the world needs more bold people of God, refusing to back down, standing up for their beliefs and for others.

May God fill us with their boldness, so that we cannot help but speak of what we have seen and heard.