

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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May 7, 2006
4th Sunday after Easter
Acts 4:23-33
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Acts 4:23-33
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 23
Second Lesson: 1 John 3:1-2
Gospel: John 10:11-18

Walk Together in Christ

There is something to be said about walking side by side with someone else that is special to you, isn't there? Whether it is the first time you are walking with a date and you walk hand in hand or arm in arm, there is a special something about doing that. Or maybe when you are a young child there is something special about walking together and reaching up and grabbing your mom or dad's arm and walking along hand in hand. Sometimes it lasts quite awhile that way. Some of the special moments from when I was playing sports were after games in college—walking off the field and meeting my dad at the sideline and talking about the game and discussing it and going over it before we got to the locker room. There is something special about walking together at various times like that.

This morning we take a look at a picture of the early church in Acts 4 and we see them walking together with Christ at one very specific time. We see what that meant for them—how they walked together in prayer during times of trouble and how they walked together in action to live for the grace God had given him. But it is not just a history lesson because as we consider these words of God, we see that we also are blessed by God to walk together as a congregation united in faith. We are blessed by God to walk together as a church body united in faith. Maybe it is good for us to consider ways that we can walk together in Christ in prayer in times of trouble, both as a congregation and the synod, and how we can walk together in Christ in action, using God's gifts as a congregation and as a church body.

Times of trouble I said—the text starts out with *On their release* (Acts 4:23)—it is their release from the city jail. Peter and John went back to their own people. They had, in the name of Jesus, healed a man who had been a cripple from birth and the man was now about 40 years old. The people in the city of Jerusalem had seen it. They confessed clearly, boldly and loudly that this miracle had been done in the name of Jesus who had been crucified in that city. So the Sanhedrin and the other leaders of Jerusalem were not happy because that was the reason that they put Jesus to death—so they would stop hearing about him and so that they would stop seeing him as a threat to what they felt the Lord had wanted them to do. Now here these men were, healing people, performing miracles and saying, “But you people killed Jesus whom God has made both Lord and Savior.” So they weren't happy. They grabbed them and threw them in prison, in jail. Then they brought them up and talked to them. But they saw that the people knew what had happened. They knew the man had been a cripple and they knew that he was now healed. They knew who did it and the people knew why it was done—it was in the name of Jesus. So they knew that they couldn't really do

anything to Peter and John at that point in time. But they did warn them very severely, “Don’t make us guilty of this man’s blood. Don’t keep talking about him in the city.”

If you were in the sandals of one of these believers when the report comes back and you hear everything that had been said there, is it a real leap of logic to think that when they warn you severely not to talk about Jesus that they are talking about a little bit more than a slap on the wrist? These were the people that not all that long before had been in locked rooms because of their fear of the Jews because they knew what they were capable of. They put an innocent man to death, set a murderer free, and they knew anything was possible. So they were in trouble. What was threatening them? What was the trouble? They were in threat of bodily harm if they continued to speak the Gospel.

Isn’t it interesting to note what they did and how they joined together in prayer? Isn’t it interesting to note that they didn’t spend a lot of time (at least that we are told) wringing their hands and saying, “Oh those terrible, terrible men. How could they do such a thing?” They don’t waste their breath on things that aren’t going to accomplish anything. They flee to God’s Word and they flee to the Lord in prayer. Notice what they say about the Book of Psalms, what they say about Psalm 2. They say, “Your Holy Spirit spoke through David in this Psalm” and then they quote the Psalm about nations conspiring against God’s Anointed One. They applied God’s Word to their problem. They saw how God had already described many of these things that would happen.

When it says in Acts 2 after Pentecost that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread in prayer, it is not just lip service that they say this because you see them all together taking the apostles’ teaching, taking the Word of God and applying it to their situation. You see them going to Sovereign Lord—the God of absolute power (that is what that name for him means), the one who had the ability to do something about this. The sheep fled to the shepherd who could take care of them. Then they prayed interestingly—they didn’t pray, “Lord, remove these men from power because they are making our lives miserable. Lord, remove this difficulty from our lives.” You don’t see them saying that at all either. Notice what they did ask God for—they said, “*Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus*” (Acts 4:30). Isn’t that fascinating? They say, “Lord, make us an answer to our problem. Give us the strength to keep speaking in the face of threats to our physical well being. Give us the strength of faith that only the Holy Spirit can give us so that we can do the things that you have called us to do.” Wouldn’t you be inclined to say, “Lord, remove this problem?” Wouldn’t you be inclined to say, “Lord, send someone to remove this problem for us. Lord, get those apostles out there so they keep doing that stuff so we can be safe here in this room.” None of that. They say, “Help us keep speaking boldly.” It’s amazing, just simply amazing.

That was what they did in times of trouble. They walked together in prayer. When you look around today, what are the times of trouble? What is it that threatens the ministry of our congregation? What is it that threatens the ministry of our church body? Any of you here busy this morning looking over your shoulder out those nice clear windows in

the back to see if any paddy wagon is pulling up to throw you in jail? Any of you afraid that when you go home today someone is going to come and seize you and throw you in prison and bring you bodily harm because you are worshipping Christ? I don't know that I have ever felt in physical danger for doing the work the Lord has laid before me as a Christian. I may have had people call me names and things like that, but no one has ever threatened me physically. I don't know if any of us have really faced any real physical threats in the sense that they did. Maybe Satan has gotten smarter in how he attacks the work of the church today. Instead of attacking it directly with these threats of physical hardship, has he found a different way to attack us? What is it that threatens us? Is it that we don't have faithful people volunteering and serving the Lord in various ways in our congregation? Is it that we don't have capable workers to train us and equip us for this ministry?

I see a lot of people serving their Lord out of love for their Savior. I would venture to say that our workers are pretty capable. What is it? Or are there no threats whatsoever to the ongoing ministry of our congregation? Are we seizing every last opportunity the Lord is laying in front of us to share the Gospel with people who already know Christ and with people who don't know Christ? What about on the synodical level? Do we have faithful leaders? Do we have people working in various areas? Sure. I think I would probably say the largest threat that Satan puts in front of us in a congregation and in our church body today is financial. "Woe is us. We don't have the resources to do this or to do that. We can't open new missions. We can't do this. We can't do that." It is kind of an interesting thing in a time of material abundance that we live in that this is the problem that we have.

When you look around at this building that was built in 1927, which time period had more physical blessings, then or now? It is kind of interesting that this is what threatens us in both areas and how the devil plays off of this at times I think is this—he gets us together and instead of viewing our leaders as people that are faithfully seeking to serve the Lord and do what they feel is right before God, we sit back and wait for them to make a decision and then say, "What are they doing that for?" Not just on a congregational level. As I go to different places and talk to different people and the conversation turns to what is going on in our church body, I hear some of my fellow pastors talking about "they" and "them" instead of "us" and what can "we" do. That is troubling. I suppose at times I fall into the same kind of thing. The devil leads me down that path.

But the answer that I think we see in the early church isn't to sit here and point fingers. It isn't to blame one another. It isn't to find someone that we can push the blame onto so that we can feel better ourselves. The answer is to say, "Lord, use me. Use me to be a part of the answer to this problem that threatens the Gospel work among us. Use me, Lord." That was the prayer of the early church and maybe it is a good prayer for us to imitate. "Lord, you have all power. You can do all things. Send your spirit and bless us that we might be an answer to being faithful, true witnesses to the Gospel that you have entrusted to us to speak."

Maybe it is good if we all spend a time of prayer regularly for our congregation and for our synod that God would bless us with boldness to do the work he has given to us to

carry out. As you see in the early church when the people prayed, the Lord answered. He answered in a way that they could understand immediately. He shook the room and then he answered in a way so they could see the ongoing results. We are told that *they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly* (Acts 4:31). All of them—not just the apostles—but all of them spoke the word of God boldly. Their love for one another was shown in tangible ways as they helped out each other as they had need. And *with great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all* (Acts 4:33).

Here is what empowers us—when we look at how we have failed in various areas in the past to pray that the Lord would use us as an answer to what troubles us, God’s empty tomb assures us that where we have failed in the past, it has been taken away, our sin and our failures, by the blood of Jesus Christ because the grave was empty. Jesus rose. We have been declared “not guilty.” Our sins have been taken away for all the times that we have pointed the finger and failed to be the answer for what troubles us when God tells us that we have a part to play. Then, empowered by the knowledge that God has loved us and forgiven us, emboldened by his very body and blood that assures us that our sins are forgiven, we know that much grace is upon us. The Spirit is among us through the Word. The Spirit is among us in the Sacrament. He strengthens us. He builds us up so that we have this intense love and desire for God and for his work and that we want it to be carried out and we want it to be carried out through us. That is what the Spirit will do when we are in Word and Sacrament. When we are not, we will probably end up pointing fingers. When we are, we will thank God that we have the opportunity to serve, both here in our community where we can see it and where we can’t see it as we work together to train Called Workers to continue to go out and equip people for this service.

God’s people in the WELS have been blessed with faithful teachers, with faithful preachers, and faithful men and women that train them to be such. And as we continue to pray for the Lord’s blessings, God will answer our prayers and he will answer them through us.