

07/17/11

The Message That Draws Us Together

- many of us watched with amazement the wildfire that raged across Arizona last month.
 - known formally as the wallow fire, officials now say the fire burned more than 469,000 acres, or 733 square miles, or an area twice the size of Chicago...
 - 5000 residents were told to evacuate mountain communities and many homes were lost...
 - the fire spread at such an incredible rate and pace literally hundreds of thousands of people were without electricity because of how many power lines went down...affecting some utility customers as far east as the state of Texas...
 - there were more than 4700 firefighters engaged in this battle...and I'm sure many of them felt like this poor fellow..."I really need a bigger shovel..."
 - that's the thing about a forest fire – its ability to spread rapidly, and once it gets going---it is very hard to put out...
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- if you have trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you are part of something that has power like that to spread...not in a destructive way, but in a positive fashion that accomplishes the work of God in this age...
 - it's the proclamation of the gospel...a message that some people try to ignore and others try to stamp out...but it's too late...
 - the Holy Spirit of God started the fire...and being part of that great news of Jesus Christ and the new life that is available in/through His name being spread throughout our community and around this world is what draws a church of people like ours together...
 - this morning, I'd like to talk to you about that message...
 - **The Message that Draws Us Together...**
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- with that in mind, please open your Bible to Acts chapter 4...page 94 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
 - last week we started a brand new series in the book of Acts and we pointed out that this portion of Scripture is highly appropriate for us to study this year to help us in our endeavor of **Living Life Together...**
 - the reason for that is that the book of Acts is the first book describing the birth and history of the early church...
 - and it is filled with discussions about how the initial followers of Jesus related to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ
 - so the thought is – let's learn all we can about how to live life together now by carefully examining all the ways they lived life together then...
 - I mentioned last Sunday that we wouldn't be looking at every last verse and every last issue...that's not our purpose...
 - but I would encourage you to devote some of your personal Bible study time to reading the book in its entirety...multiple time over the next couple of months...
 - if you do that, I would also encourage you to try to read it from multiple translations if Scripture...
 - you also might want to read it from a reliable study Bible, and take the time the study notes as you go...or maybe even a good commentary on the book of Acts...
 - that will help you pick up anything I don't take the time to address in these messages...
 - last week we talked about our elevator speech – if you were going to quickly and succinctly explain to another person how the church began, our roots, our central and foundational

purpose...how would you do it?...the first 2 chapters give us the information necessary to do that well...and in the process they remind us about how the church had a wonderful beginning...like any well-crafted elevator speech, it is a marvelous story to tell...

- in Acts 1-2, Jesus completed his 40 day ministry to the apostles prior to ascending to heaven...
- remembered that after Christ was crucified and buried, and then resurrected from the dead 3 days later...Scripture teaches that he taught his disciples for 40 more days before His ascension...and we have some of those training sessions recorded for us in the Word of God...
- one of the essential verses to know in this part of our story is... **Acts 1:8 - but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.**
- so there's a clear promise – something is going to happen in the future..."when the Holy Spirit comes...then you'll be my witness..."
- well, when was that promise fulfilled?...10 days later...on the day of Pentecost...
 - the Holy Spirit comes upon the apostles...
 - even though there are people in Jerusalem who speak many different languages, the apostles are able to speak in such a way that each person hears the gospel in his/her own language...that was the gift of tongues...one of the sign gifts that authenticated the apostles message --- which was necessary before the completion of the NT...
 - and also a gift that signified judgment on the Jewish nation because of their rejection of Christ as their Messiah...
 - Christ's followers were now to proclaim the message of salvation in Christ to all the nations...and God is giving them the power and ability to get that done...
 - Chapter 2 ends after Peter has preached a marvelous message about the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ...
 - and he urges the people present to repent of their sin and receive Christ as Savior and Lord...and then to be baptized to publically demonstrate the salvation that has already completely and finally occurred in their hearts...
 - and 3000 people responded to that invitation and they were organized into the first church...
 - the text ended with them studying and praying and fellowshiping together in what became our first glance at the early church Living Life Together...and it was a really beautiful thing...
- now you'll notice we skipped chapter 3...but here's the quick version of what happened...
 - Peter and John were going to the temple to pray...and there was a beggar there who was unable to walk and he asked the apostles for money...and this is where Peter makes the famous statement – silver and gold have I none, but such as I have I will give to you...
- then he says – in the name of Jesus the Nazarene, rise up and walk...and the man did it...in fact, verse 8 says that **Acts 3:8 - With a leap he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.**
- can you imagine what that scene would have been like...that would have gone viral on youtube for sure...that's how you start a wildfire...
- and that gives Peter the occasion to preach his second recorded sermon in the book of Acts...part of which reads like this... **Acts 3:13-16 - "The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release**

Him. But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, but put to death the Prince of life, *the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.*

- that's called – telling it like it is...when issues of eternity are stake, you can't mince words or risk clarity...and it also made the fire rage with greater intensity for sure...
- now, it's in that setting that we come to chapter 4...**read Acts 4:1-36...**
- we're talking about **The Message that Draws Us Together**...and with the time we have remaining, let's look for **4 characteristics of the gospel that bind us together as a family...**

I. A Message of Hope.

- one of the best ways for any message to spread is if it contains true, lasting hope for men and women struggling with the hardship of living in a sin-cursed world...
- but that's the thing about this message...there's hope...

A. Because great things can be accomplished if Jesus is alive.

- that is one of the primary themes of the book of Acts...
- Jesus is alive...He was telling the truth when He prophesied His resurrection from the dead...
- and you can imagine this crippled beggar...who is hoping maybe for a coin or two...and within minutes he is doing something he never thought he would be able to do in this life in his wildest dreams...he's leaping around the temple...praising God at the top of his lungs...it must have been an incredible sight...
- and you can imagine yourself standing there with whatever problem or difficulty you might have had at the time...or one of your loved ones may have had at the time...
 - and all of a sudden that problem or difficulty...at least potentially...is cast in an entirely different light...
 - there is a source of power here that I don't yet understand...which immediately gives me a whole lot more hope than I've ever had in my entire life...
- now let me address a potential response that you might have to what I just said...
 - but isn't this one of those sign gifts that you discussed last week that was transitional in nature, that died out after the Bible was completed...
 - so it's nice that it happened then but how is it relevant to us today?...
 - and the answer comes from a statement that Jesus made to His followers prior to going to the cross...
 - **John 14:12 - Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father.**
- how could you do greater works than Jesus did?...it's because many of Christ's miracles were both marvelous but also temporary...even Lazarus who was raised from the dead...eventually died again...
- but the work Christ has called us to do has eternal impact on the lives of those who repent and believe...
- so make no mistake about this – great things can still be accomplished because Jesus is alive...more about that in a minute...but let's bring what happened next into the discussion...it's a message of hope...

B. Even in the midst of opposition.

- the passage says that the priests and the captains of the temple and the Sadducees and Annas and Caiaphas were...

1. Some were “greatly disturbed” by this message – v. 2.

- and you can certainly see why...they were involved in putting Jesus to death...
- and they went to bed on Good Friday believing they had won the battle...the fire was out...their leader was dead...
- and now there are these reports circulating everywhere that He's alive...
- and the Sadducees would have especially been upset from a theological perspective because they denied the possibility of resurrection—so their entire belief system is at stake...
- so they essentially running around with a little shovel trying to put out a really big fire...but it's too late...and verse 4 makes that clear...

2. Many others believed – v. 4.

- Acts 4:4 - But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.**
- the church is growing quickly and dramatically...regardless of what others were doing to try to stop it...why?...because it was...

C. Centered on the powerful name of our risen Savior.

- that's why Peter ended this conversation by saying...
- Acts 4:10-12 - let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. “He is the STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED by you, THE BUILDERS, but WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone. “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”**
- one of the greatest compliments that can ever be given to a church is – you know, you people are always talking about Christ...you can't go very far into a substantive conversation without bringing in the name of Jesus...
- you don't talk much about politics, or extraneous religious laws, or the latest fad of the day, or the opinions of men...that's right...we want our lives and our ministries and our message to be centered on the gospel of Christ...
- it's like Paul would later say... 1 Corinthians 2:1-2 - And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.**
- [and it's amazing how frequently the Lord will give us opportunities to proclaim this message if we're looking for them...tell about the woman from another city who inadvertently sent us an e-mail telling us to never send anyone to her house again saying that she couldn't save herself but needed Christ...]
- now, what else do we see as the story unfolds?...it's also...

II. A Message of Transformation.

- Acts 4 is the beginning of the persecution of the church...
- it is a very important development in church history...
- but what happens is – that pressure results in the message being spread and the disciples being both matured and drawn together...
- that's one of the things we love about the message—is that it transforms us...

A. Makes “wise the simple.”

- **Acts 4:13 - Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.**
- something miraculous has happened to these men because they are uneducated and untrained...
- and I realize the wording of this point might strike you as odd...but it comes from the OT book of Psalms when David was discussing the impact God's Word can have on us...
- **Psalm 19:7 - The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.**
- and as a result, it...

B. Generates indisputable evidence.

- **Acts 4:14 - And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply.**
- it is really hard to argue with a changed life...what do you say to that?...
 - and that very well may be one of the take aways for many here this am...
 - you may say – you know, I'm not really sure I see a place for me here...I just recently came to Christ and I have so much to learn and so many things to change...what contribution could I ever make?...
 - please don't ever believe that...it's the contribution of a changed and changing life...and that greatly helps this church accomplish our mission to faithfully proclaim Christ in this community...
 - there are people who have walked faithfully with Christ for 20 years...that becomes indisputable evidence...
 - there are marriages here that are hitting the 25 year mark, 30, 40, 50...
 - by people who would say – Jesus is the One who kept us together – bingo...argue with that...
 - we have some single people here who are committed to live in both holiness and sacrificial service...that screams a message about the transforming power of Christ...
 - we have a lot of parents running around here...and some young people who are doing well...not all---but many...you cannot argue with that...
 - don't underestimate the power of even a little thing...
 - that's the beauty of that little phrase in **verse 13 – began to recognize them as having been with Jesus**
 - **there are some important questions that flow out of that, aren't there?...**
 1. have you “been with Jesus” in the sense that you have trusted Christ as Savior and Lord – He is obviously in the process of transforming you?
 2. are you “with Jesus” on a regular basis?...[cf. spending time daily in the Word and prayer]...in a way that produces a clear difference in the way you live every day...
 3. would others have reason to say this about you?
 - someone was telling me recently that what attracted her to the church was walking by a groups of teens in the community center [and believe me, when I hear a sentence that starts like that, I want to dive for cover]...but she said that this group greeted her, spoke respectfully, living in a mature way that just stood out...I wish I knew who those teens were...so Pastor Green could take you all out for ice cream...
 - and here's another important piece of this puzzle...as God accomplishes His transforming work over time...the powerful message...

C. Gives us confidence.

- that is a key theme in this passage...
- not arrogance, but a settled conviction that Jesus is alive and He is worthy of our allegiance...
- did you see it in the text?...
- v. 13 – as they observed the confidence of Peter and John...
- vv. 19-20 - Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.
- v. 29 - And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence,

- so in verse 22, they're released from prison...and what do they do?...
- they get together, and they connect their experiences to the message...and that continues to bind them together because they have...

III. A Message of Direction

- you might have expected them to be all in an uproar about the fact that they are being persecuted and threatened for their faith...that's not at all what's happening here...
- because they open their Bibles...and they say, what we're experiencing is exactly what was predicted in God's Word...

A. Grounded in the Scriptures.

- that is one of the things that has really helped us around here...I've mentioned a few times in the last couple of weeks how we have been willing to change and adapt in an effort to minister to our ever changing culture...
- but on the other hand, our commitment to Christ and His Word will never change...
 - and over time, that garners a level of respect from a watching world...because they keep changing their view on the origin and nature of man...
 - so they believe this about how the human race developed, and we believe what Scripture says...
 - and then they discard their position and believe something else, and we believe what Scripture says...
 - and they change again...and change again...
 - and over time, it's what Paul said about men and women in the last days... **2 Timothy 3:7 - always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.**
 - and you want to say – you know, if you keep believing the same thing about the origin of the world for like 5 years, then come back and let's talk...but it's pretty hard for us to buy the confidence of your position when the ink is barely dry on the latest iteration...
- the same is true with the nature of man – are we doing self-love today, or codependency, or multiple personality disorder, or drug therapy—what's the flavor of the month?...
- the Scriptures give us direction...and when you get a group of people heading in that same biblical direction...it draws us together...especially when it's...

B. Empowered by the Spirit.

- there is a delightful balance here between the objective Word of God [on one hand] coupled with the subjective work of the Spirit [on the other]...so we read...
- **Acts 4:24-25 - And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of**

our father David Your servant, said, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the people devise futile things?”

- so they weren't thrown off kilter by this persecution because they knew their Bibles predicted this very thing...and they also understood that their Bibles, and their ability to properly apply and live it was a supernatural matter for sure...
- and please think again about this whole matter of being drawn together...
 - people who are used to depending on the Spirit of God together are going to be knit together into a very close group of people...that's what happens when everybody is on the same page...
 - we want the Scripture to be our guide...
 - and are depending on the Holy Spirit to help us follow it...
- and that is exactly the way we see this chapter end...illustrating that we also have...

IV. A Message of Unity

A. They were of one heart and soul – v. 32

- so they shared with one another to be sure everyone's needs were met...

B. They continued to proclaim the message.

Acts 4:33 - And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.

C. They gave sacrificially so that the mission could be advanced.

- the chapter ends in a way that prepares us for the devastating events of the final chapter...
- Lord willing, we'll look at all of that next Sunday...
- but here's a delightful man who's a great product of the message...
- **Acts 4:36-37 - Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.**