

“Love is Lord of Heaven and Earth”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Acts 4:1-22
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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In today’s text we witness a power struggle. The priests, the captain of the temple guard, the Sadducees—in other words, the important people—are disturbed because the apostles are preaching a message that has not been authorized or approved by the temple, by the guys in charge.

In fact, the apostle’s message rather contradicts some of the teachings of the Sadducees regarding life after death, and furthermore the apostles are doing this stuff in the name of Jesus—the guy the religious leaders put to death. Oh, AND Peter and John claim he didn’t stay dead.

Talk about obnoxious little obstructionists.

The important religious people would like nothing more than to discredit and dismiss these guys so that no one pays attention to them, but they can’t because Peter and John just healed a man who’d been lame for more than forty years. There were too many witnesses to discredit it. Unfortunately Peter and John healed the lame man in the name of . . . guess who? Jesus. The religious leaders can’t rid of that name no matter how hard they try. Beat it, burn it, crucify it, and the name only grows more popular.

The text reports an astonishing five thousand men now believe. Even then, they forget to include the women in the count, meaning they severely underestimate the power of the movement. This Jesus thing cannot be stopped. But that doesn’t keep the religious leaders from trying to stop it, or at least contain it. They seize Peter and John and put them in jail, as if bars might be an effective hold against the Gospel.

The next day a bunch of people gather. The text gives us a list: the rulers, the elders, and the teachers of the law, Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexandar, and others of the high priest’s family. You and I may not recognize those names, but clearly the earliest readers of the book of Acts were expected to know who these men were as the author does not deem it necessary to provide any distinguishing detail. These are the sorts of people whom you can call by first name, no explanation needed, like saying Beyonce or Elvis or Barak—everyone knows who you mean. In other words, a bunch of people gather the next morning, and they are the important people.

Their question to Peter and John, “By whose name did you do this?” makes painfully obvious what is at stake here. It is a question of authority, a question of who’s who, of what name carries the most weight, of who has the power. Their question makes painfully clear that they feel, they fear their authority is being threatened.

Now some of them probably sincerely believe that by putting Peter and John on trial, they are protecting God (not themselves), failing to understand that God is big enough and strong enough

not to need human protection. Any time you think you're protecting God, you have misunderstood your place and confused the roles. God is *your* protector, and God is never your project, your possession, or your territory in need of defense. This is no game of the capture the flag. You are not a fortress or a castle or an army or a vault.

You are a vessel meant to be filled to overflowing, you are a love that cannot be contained, you are a child of God compelled to share and share and share and give your power away. You are a sheep following a shepherd, and sheep do not wield swords, nor do they hold court.

But the religious leaders forget—as religious leaders so often do—that they are fellow sheep. They fancy themselves kings, rulers, tell-you-what-to-do-ers. They have stopped exploring the Mystery of God with the people. They instead stamp out any part of the Mystery they have not personally experienced and mastered. They take it upon themselves to contain God's work, limit God's revelation, and control God's messaging.

Peter and John, however, have encountered a God who will not be contained, limited, or controlled—not even by death itself—so that when the priests and the Sadducees and the rulers of the law try to question their authority, they have no reservations about speaking what they know. The uncontainable God is spilling out of them, and you can't put a lid on that.

The resurrection was like twisting the cap off a bottle of soda that you've shook real hard, like cutting the cork off champagne. The Sadducees are frantically trying to restrain the fizz as if that were possible, as if the bubbling up of the Spirit were a force you could suppress.

They can't deny that Peter and John just performed a miracle—everyone knows about the walking, leaping lame man. But they decide they can tell Peter and John to quit using that name. Cut it out with the Jesus talk.

Peter and John reply to their demand like this: “Which is right in God's eyes? To listen to you or to God? You can judge. But as for us, we cannot help it! We must speak about what we have seen and heard.”

And right there, before all the high and mighty powers of the institution, two fishermen from Galilee declare without flinching that they have the authority to speak in God's name.

This is BIG.

While the name of God is often misused by those with power to coerce, control, and cast fear, the name of God on the lips of the oppressed becomes a freedom cry and a liberation song. When the small people, the forgotten people grow bold enough to believe and to say, “God is with us too,” suddenly the illusion that God belongs to the elite is shattered, the Gospel explodes past the prison doors, shackles fall from the ankles of Joy so that she may dance wild and free in the streets amidst the most common, most beautiful of people.

Look, I know that everywhere you turn these days, someone else is claiming to speak for God and at first glance it seems loud and chaotic and confusing. But really, it is quite simple. 1 John puts it this way:

- “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?”
- “This is how we recognize the spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God . . .”
- “Whoever does not love does not know God . . .”
- “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, who they have not seen.
- “God has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must love their brother and sister.”
- This is God’s command, that we love one another.”

When you are on the side of love, you speak for God. When you are grasping to maintain power, you have failed to know God; you are like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. You have already lost (everything that matters). You have forgotten you are sheep, you have lost connection with the Shepherd. You are powerful but lost, and in your lost-ness, power matters not.

But when you abide in love, the love will abide in you, burst through your seams, ooze out your pores, radiate from your skin. You will be filled to overflowing with the kind of power that cannot possibly corrupt you because it was never your power to begin with. You are merely the host, dancing your uncontainable resurrected life in wild abandon to the dismay of the rattled authorities who have discovered they don’t have a lick of authority over you.

Let the dancing commence. Amen.