



APRIL 14  
9AM | 11AM

jesus  
our  
cornerstone

TRANSFORMATIVE  
COMMUNITY  
SERMON SERIES

Sunday, April 14, 2024 | *Transformative Community*  
“Jesus, Our Cornerstone” | Acts 4:1-14 | Megan Berry

This week we’re continuing our journey through Acts, though we’re stopping just a few chapters in at chapter 4. Before we hear our scripture for today, I want to give us some much-needed context for what happened in the previous chapter, that was the start of Peter and John landing in jail and being brought before the Sanhedrin council.

In the previous chapter, as Peter and John were heading to the temple for prayer, they came upon a disabled man who was being placed upon the temple steps so he could ask for money from those who were going in to pray. As Peter and John approached him, Peter told him that he has no silver to give but he could give him the ability to stand up and walk in the name of Christ Jesus. So the disabled man was healed, and was able to get up and walk from that place, jumping for joy, and praising God for what had just happened.

Now, one might read that and say “great! Awesome! Look at that great deed, how cool are Peter and John for that!” and a lot of folks were thinking that, they started crowding the man who was sticking around Peter and John and asking lots of great questions.

Unfortunately, the Sadducees (one of the religious authorities of the time) were not happy about this crowd forming and how this might threaten not only temple activities but the peace that the Roman Empire expected the Sadducees to uphold for them.

So, in the midst of this uproar and questioning, we find ourselves at our passage for this morning, hear these words of scripture from Acts 4 starting in verse 1.

“While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day,

for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed, and they numbered about five thousand.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is

‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
it has become the cornerstone.’

“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. 14 When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.”

Thanks be to God for these words of Scripture.

Now, it can be really easy to hear these words and think that Peter is speaking against other religions and pushing Jesus as the only way to salvation and therefore attempting to convert people. That is certainly one way to interpret this scripture, but it misses some key nuances that point to a possibility of a different interpretation.

First nuance to tackle, as we read about the Saducees and the Sanhedrin council, it’s important to remember that these folks are not a rival religion that the disciples are now attempting to convert, rather they are all of the same religion currently. Remember Peter and John were heading to the Jewish temple to pray when they stopped to heal the disabled man. Though we are reading about the earliest Christians, we are still in a grey area where the earliest Christians were also still navigating the

eventual split between Christianity and Judaism. Although it's not a perfect 1:1 analogy, what we are reading is sort of like if Peter were Presbyterian and he was being brought to a Presbytery meeting or defending himself against leaders at General Assembly.

The Sanhedrin council and Saducees are not his religious enemy, they are simply of a different sect of the same faith, and they are very human and prone to questioning things that potentially threaten the peace of the community or the power they hold. And that's exactly where our conflict comes from. You see when Peter and John healed the man, the Sanhedrin council and Saducees were worried that they were healing the man of their own powers and that they were a "rival" group like the Shamans or other mystical healing groups of their time.

The council was less concerned about the man being healed and more concerned about keeping power and authority in their hands and their hands only even if that meant not allowing for new ways for the Spirit to move, especially if that movement was one, they didn't understand. This passage serves as a reminder to them and to us that God and the Holy Spirit will work through the powerful and authoritative but especially will work through the not so powerful and authoritative to bring salvation to all people.

And the salvation that Peter mentions here is not just one of individual salvation for going to heaven, rather it can have multiple layers of meaning including a physical healing like we find in our passage, rescue from oppression (like we find in many scripture passages), and spiritual wholeness.

As we journey through Acts and through these interactions with the disciples and other religious authorities of their time, we can see them slowly building and defining their community as Christ followers. Last week, we heard the community define some of the ways they created community after people were baptized, by breaking bread together and devoting themselves to prayer and learning. Now, we're seeing how they enact some of those teachings, especially when faced with conflict.

As I think about the transformative community and Christ as our Cornerstone like I mentioned to the kids in the children's time, I'm left ruminating on a thought I had in seminary. In one of my classes in the midst of talks about religious pluralism (how various religions coexist in society, can they coexist in society) and questions of "why do we have so many denominations that all seemingly lead to the same outcome (a

belief in Jesus and the triune God) with so many varying nitpicks in theology?” This was in my first year of seminary, and though I hadn’t read a whole lot yet or started the wonderful process of really questioning my beliefs and forming a better understanding of my own theological claims, I found myself stating something that I would come back to time and time again. I raised my hand and said, “what if denominations are just like flavors of pie, I prefer apple, Anthony (one of my friends in class who is methodist) prefers cherry, so long as neither of our pies are poisonous, shouldn’t that be, okay?”

Even though the analogy is a little silly, made even sillier when you get bad graphics involved. I think the moral of it holds true. So long as the pie (or better yet the foundation to go better with our cornerstone metaphor in the scripture) is based on layers of love, forgiveness, helping others, who cares what the filling of the pie is or the color of the building is? We each have the joy of finding a church home that fits our particular “tastes” and as long as that’s not poisonous and harming the most vulnerable in our society, then I think we’re doing alright.

And I have to wonder if Peter and John didn’t feel a little bit like I did with my poisonous pie analogy. You can almost hear it in Peter’s voice when he asks the council (remember he’s defending himself within his own faith tradition, not against another tradition yet) “if we are being questioned today about a good deed done to someone who was sick...” You can almost hear the pleading in his tone like “come onnnnn, don’t be a poisonous pie, we all want the greater good of society here, right? Right?”

So, as we sit here, two weeks after Easter, two weeks after Christ was brutally murdered by Roman authorities yet was resurrected three days later, it can feel all too easy as Resurrection people to create an “us vs them” dynamic in our thoughts. It’s all too easy to assume others are poisoning our pie because they don’t believe in the exact same doctrine or theological thought as us, or assuming someone has the worst intentions in mind when they do something different than we would have. But I think part of what this passage is calling us to and reminding us of is that we aren’t meant to argue our way into converting people or argue our way into places of power. We’re meant to state what we believe and hold fast to our truths, but not in a malicious or harmful way.

Part of what Peter calls out in his defense is that Jesus is the cornerstone that the builders (the Sanhedrin, the roman empire, political & religious powers of the time) have rejected. Remember the cornerstone is the first stone set in a building, it is

literally what all the other stones are based upon and sets the direction for the foundation.

So when looking at the broad strokes of Jesus' teachings "love God and love your neighbor", "do to others as you would have done to you" and to help those in need, even if they are different from you, we can assume that Peter is calling them out for rejecting these more "hands on" lessons for the safety and security of their places of power.

I don't think Peter wants us to take these words, this defense of his actions to heal a disabled man and use them as our call to action to make every person Presbyterian or even Christian. I think Peter (and Jesus for that matter) would want us to take these words as a reminder that we do have power through the Holy Spirit to make a difference and that difference should be something that rests on a strong foundation of loving one another, helping one another, forgiving one another. After all Jesus is hopefully our cornerstone, pointing us in a direction of building and transforming in the name of love and forgiveness.

Amen.