

The Cornerstone
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Today's scripture reading is a continuation of a story that Matt preached on last week. And the story actually starts even before that. So, I want to set up what has happened to better understand our scripture today. We are going to be in Acts, chapter 4, but I want to start at Acts, chapter 3.

Peter and John were going up to the temple in Jerusalem. As they approached the gate to enter, there was a man there who couldn't walk. He was born with legs that didn't support him. And each day he was carried to the temple gate to collect alms or charity from people coming to the temple. (I find it a lovely note that the Bible makes, the gate that he sat by was called the Beautiful Gate. And something beautiful happened there.)

The man asked Peter and John for alms. Being crippled and begging was a shameful occupation, so as the man asked, he looked down not making eye contact. Peter said, "look at us". The man looked up at Peter and John. Peter continued "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give to you: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Then Peter offered him his hand and helped the man stand up. The man could stand. He walked into the temple area with Peter and John praising God.

Now, people began to notice the man who was drawing attention to himself, and they knew that he was the man who could not walk that would sit outside the Beautiful Gate of the temple asking for alms. They began to crowd around and ask what happened to him; they were astonished!

Peter—with what I imagine to be a heavy dose of frustration—says to the people: God did it! The God that you claim. The God of Abraham and Issaac. The God of Jacob. The God who sent Jesus who was handed over to be killed earlier this year. The God who raised that same Jesus from the dead. In the name of Jesus this man was made strong. But now you are acting like you have no clue who I am talking about. Remember our ancestor, Abraham. You too are people of the covenant that God made with Abraham. Remember the messiah that Moses told us was coming, the messiah the prophets foretold, the messiah Samuel predicted was coming? God sent us Jesus and while he was here for just a short time now, he has been resurrected and will come again.

Now the religious officials could not help but see what was happening and they quickly came to Peter and John. The Bible specifically says the religious elites were annoyed that

Peter and John were preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. So, they arrested Peter and John, but not before, over 5000 people came to believe in the message that they were preaching.

And this is where our scripture picks up: Peter and John were thrown in jail for the night.

Acts 4:5-12

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."

[for a better translation that is more faithful to the original Greek is: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which this man has been saved"]

There is a lot to unpack in this story. But first and foremost, this story is about power. Who has power. Who wants power. Whose power feels threatened. Who actually has power.

It has been a matter of weeks since Jesus has been crucified and resurrected. The people who Jesus threatened the most were the religious elite who held the power. With Jesus gone, their power was successfully maintained, and the threat was eliminated...or was he. As J.R. Daniel Kirk states in his commentary on this text: "Resurrection is an annoyance to those who would use the power of death in their attempts to snuff out the living presence of the power of God."

One could easily assume that death would put an end to someone who was threatening to take your power. So far it has a 100% success rate. But then came Jesus and death did not have the final word. Resurrection was the curveball that no one saw coming. Even Thomas, Jesus's own friend said that he could not believe what he was seeing with his own eyes, he needed to touch Jesus's scars with his own hands.

Of course the religious elites were annoyed, Jesus found the loophole. Of course they were frustrated when Peter and John perform miracles and give credit to Jesus. Of course they were irritated when the people were reminded of the resurrection of Jesus. Of course they were mad when over 5,000 people came to believe and follow Jesus after they had tried to eliminate him.

And yet, missing from this conversation is the story of a man who for the first time in his *entire life* stood on his own two feet and walked. Can you image what it would have been like for the people who came to pick him up from the Beautiful Gate of the temple and saw him walking? Can you image the door to his house opening and strolling in is the man who has never walked through the doorway of his own house before? The priests are so concerned about the messiah taking away their power, that they missed the beauty that happened at the beautiful gate. This man's story—the story of his family, the story of his community—has been irrevocably changed for the better.

It seems that power is a mighty drug that not only grasped people in biblical times, but in modern times as well. We have countries at war over land. The gift that God entrusted to our care, has become a weapon of power. All while famine and death go unnoticed and become normalized.

We have political parties that vie for power at the cost of truth. They sacrifice principles for the sake of party loyalty. All the while people with power gain more power, more wealth, more influence and the under-resourced, most vulnerable, pawns become more invisible.

We have neighbors that trust anonymous people on the internet before giving their neighbor the benefit of the doubt. Face to face relationships become contingent on a litmus test of our own making. All the while we build higher fences instead of longer tables.

Power is a dangerous drug.

Last week I was in the Washington DC area at a conference called Next Church. Next Church describes its purpose as follows: *“NEXT Church seeks to follow God by strengthening the relational fabric of church — connecting healthy tissue to healthy tissue. We do this by cultivating congregations and leaders who work in sustained, effective, and faithful ways to promote God’s transformation of our communities for the common good.*

In all of our work, we actively seek to confront systems and structures of oppression in ourselves and the world around us. As those steeped in a tradition that trusts in repentance and grace, we recognize we do our work imperfectly and yet we continually strive to learn, seek forgiveness, and go a new way.”

This is a conference that I have attended throughout the years for one primary reason, it's provides space to honor and build upon the traditions of the church while holding space for the Spirit to lead the church in new and innovative ways. I love the church, and I love the time honored traditions of the church. I like the hymns I know. I like the creeds and the ancient familiar words that we say week after week. AND, I believe strongly in the reformed church tradition that believes that God is continuing to reveal God's self to us in new and exciting and scary and holy ways.

The religious elite that confronted Jesus and who confronted Peter and John were steeped in the traditions. Their faithfulness to God became too intertwined with a comfort for the institution that worked well for them. They imprisoned Peter and John because they made them uncomfortable and scared, and never took into consideration the lifechanging day for the man at the temple gate.

At the conference there was a speaker who asked us this question: If the church is the Titanic, are we so committed to keeping things the way they are that we are willing to go down with the ship? Or are we willing to take the things that God has entrusted to us and see new ways of being faithful?

This is not a sermon saying that we need to burn it all down and start anew. By no means. But I will ask you, when you feel uncomfortable or worried or scared or unsure ask yourself: Who has the power? Who is gaining power? Who is losing power? What might God have in store? These are good questions for us to ask within the church, but also in the various organizations and groups we move within.

I want to end with this: Peter reminds the religious elite "Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; [He] has become the cornerstone." Peter's message is not a threat, it is a welcomed reminder that we worship an active God. God delights in us as we become co-workers in furthering God's Kingdom. AND God is well acquainted with our humanity. We will stumble and God will still be God. We will fail and God will still be God. We will have success and God will still be God.

Power is a dangerous drug. But God is still God.

Have faith that God continues to act. Have faith that the Holy Spirit still moves. Have faith that Jesus—our Cornerstone—is still Lord.

Amen.