

First Presbyterian Church
Acts 4:23-35, “The Paradox of Faith”
by Pastor Matt Johnson 4/7/2023

When I was about 20 years old, living in Seattle,
a friend of mine wanted me to share in a business opportunity with him.

It was an exclusive network that sold
specially made vitamin supplements.

That sounded interesting, so I went to the introductory meeting,
and I heard a paradox I had never encountered before:

You have to spend money in order to make money.

There’s truth to that.

Within this business model, they explained, I would need to purchase
quite a lot of their product with my own money and then I could sell
it to other people for even more.

My friend was all in.

The problem for me was that at the age of 20,

I didn’t know very many people who needed vitamin supplements,
and I suspected there was another dynamic at work:

The same people telling me how to make money
were also interested in spending my money.

Paradoxically, even though I think I showed more wisdom about the vitamin sales,
my college buddy is the one who ended up becoming incredibly wealthy.

(But not from the vitamins.)

Today I want to talk about the paradox of true faith.

I use the term paradox fairly loosely to mean “an apparent contradiction
that, when looked at more closely, reveals a deeper truth.”

In my experience with faith, I’ve discovered that

paradoxes appear like a fingerprint left behind when God has been at work.

GK Chesterton, who lived from 1874-1936 has been called the Prince of Paradox.

Donald DeMarco says that for Chesterton,

**“The paradox of hope is that the more hopeless the situation is,
the more hopeful I must be.**

**The paradox of charity is that the weaker a thing is,
the more it should be respected.”**

Okay...now check this out:

Chesterton wrote that **“The optimist’s pleasure was prosaic,
for it dwelt on the naturalness of everything;
the Christian’s pleasure was poetic,
for it dwelt on the unnaturalness of everything
in the light of the supernatural.”**

WHAT? I’m dead. That is so good.

We’re so accustomed to the world
as it is ordered by humanity apart from God
that we are surprised by the deeper truth
revealed by God’s seemingly contradictory methods.

And so it is that in the life of Jesus we see paradoxical characteristics
coming together: Bold humility... passionate meekness... gracious justice...
patient urgency... disruptive love...

When Jesus sends the Spirit of God into the church,
the church continues to leave these paradoxical fingerprints
when the church follows God in faith.

That last part is important.

Acts chapter 4 shows the church living by paradoxical faith.

Acts chapter 5 shows the church doing...predictable unfaithful things.

But our passage shows the paradox of gaining power while suffering persecution.

You see the prayer we read about comes in the explicit context of persecution.
v. 23 -- “on their release”

The disciples Peter and John had drawn scrutiny for teaching the people
about Jesus and undermining the power of the Jewish rulers known as
the Sanhedrin.

Now remember these are the same rulers who just got Jesus killed.

So...paradoxically...they killed off the lead guy and now they’ve
got even bigger problems:

there’s a whole community of these Jesus followers!

Peter and John are told not to speak in Jesus’ name any longer.

Then comes v. 23 **“When they heard this,
they raised their voices together in prayer to God.”**

The prayer itself names a paradox:

The people who seem to be in charge are not really in charge.

Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles & the people of Israel
conspired against Jesus. They *seem* to be in charge.

But they are not the true arbiters of power!

Real power is found in the Sovereign Lord who made heaven and earth.

Early in the life of the church we see that at their best they were
people who understood the paradox of faith in
a crucified Messiah.

They are also okay with the paradox of God's sovereignty and human freedom:

Peter prays in V. 28, **"They did what your power and will
had decided beforehand should happen."**

So was Jesus' death God's holy plan or was it a terrible and evil conspiracy?

... Yes.

Now, think about people operating under normal logic facing persecution.

What would they pray for?

They might call upon God to make their lives easier.

They might call upon Jesus to break the religious elites
into pieces like Psalm 2 said he would.

But no. Listen to what they pray in v. 29

**"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants
to speak your word with great boldness.**

**Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders
through the name of your holy servant Jesus."**

What was the Jewish leader's threat?

"You better not speak or act anymore in the name of Jesus."

What was the believer's prayer, "Just keep doing what you do, God,
because we aren't going anywhere.

Enable us to speak and act

through the name of your servant, Jesus."

This prayer from persecuted people is highly strange.

Rather than praying for deliverance by God,
they pray for more trouble making from God.

And that's the paradox -- whatever trouble they may encounter
while speaking about Jesus is truly deliverance for them.

They are delivered from falling in line with the idolatries of their day.
They are delivered into the hands of the one who wields true power.

I had a conversation this week where someone brought up that they were
really scared about the upcoming election.

They said that if Trump gets elected, it's going to be terrible.
We'll lose all kinds of freedoms and he'll become a dictator.

I also had an old friend of mine who sent me an article which said,
you know who the biggest threat to American democracy is? Joe Biden.

Well, look, I don't want to be a downer, but technically
these are not mutually exclusive proposals.

I mean ... what if they're both right and we'll get a dictator
no matter who we elect!?!?

Look, I do not think these worst-case scenarios will come to pass, but *if they did...*
the church living by paradoxical faith would be okay.

Whatever *your* worst-case scenario is,
you need to remember who we serve.

The people who seem to be in charge are not really in charge.

If we remember that, we're on the path of paradoxical faith.

The paradox of possessions (4:32-35)

The next passage provides a summary of the fellowship of the believers following
this initial battle with persecution.

Always the challenge in Acts is how to interpret and apply what we read.

Is this passage a prescription or a description?

Does the text prescribe a principle of faith that everyone should emulate
in every situation?

Or does the text describe a particular situation

in which faithful people made one decision

while in other situations faithful people could decide differently?

I think this passage is a description, not a prescription,
but it is a description that we can learn a lot from and be challenged by.

The image that Luke paints for us
includes both Roman and Jewish ideas of friendship.

For Romans, who drew on Greek philosophy,
being of one mind was very important, as was sharing resources.

But Roman friendships were *always* focused on reciprocity –
what you do for me, I am obligated to do back for you.

What we see here is different because it includes the idea of grace.

The idea of giving without expecting anything in return
is a much more Jewish idea of friendship.

Are we to take from this a vision of community that includes
sharing bank accounts and living in communes? No.

This is just a description of what God's grace did among them
at that time.

Can we then dismiss this passage and go on living an isolated from others
with our money, our family, our homes, and our time? No.

The impulses of this community come from God's unchanging Spirit,
and this is hardly the only passage in the Bible
that gives us a sense that we should live
with our hands open rather than closed.

What's the paradox?

The paradox of possessions is that in giving everything away
there was nobody who had need.

Some of us here are entrusted with a lot of resources, others not so much.

But through the paradox of faith, nobody should have to worry
about becoming destitute. Why? Because we are here for each other.

By giving our resources away we make sure that we'll always have enough.

Most of you don't know this, but our deacons and a few other folks
have been delivering food to a family in need
who we learned about through an organization
called Safe Families for Children.

Safe Families connects people in churches to provide for at risk kids
before they are harmed and end up with the Department of Human Services.

So we have been helping a mother of four who had major surgery on her leg
and can't shop or cook for several weeks.

She doesn't have other family to help. She had nowhere to turn.

But because of a community committed to giving away what they have,
she doesn't have to live in need.

Is that not the same Spirit we see here in Acts 4?

Where is God calling you to leave the world of the safe,
predictable and easily explainable?

Where do you feel the tug of the Spirit into living in a way
that might seem like a contradiction, but reveals a deeper truth?

It's not easy. But it's beautiful. And it's what makes life worth living.

It reminds me of a paradox that I'll end with:

A man who was full of joyous sorrow and painful love once said,

"The one who seeks to save their life will lose it.

But whoever loses their life for my sake will save it."