

Pentecost People: Speaking with the Boldness of the Spirit

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

Acts 4:1-31, 1 Timothy 2:3-7

Sunday, September 9

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When was the last time you said something that was bold? Maybe you spoke up in an instance when you would normally keep your thoughts to yourself. Maybe you were bold enough to offer a different perspective, even when you knew others didn't hold your same opinion.

Maybe it took boldness to ask someone out on a date. To put yourself out there with someone new. Maybe it was a bold move to pop the question and ask that person to marry you.

Maybe you were bold enough to stand up for yourself – or for someone else. Or for a cause that you deeply care about. Because boldness won't allow us to be silent for long, will it?

Maybe it required boldness for you to be vulnerable with someone – to take down the walls that you tend to put up around yourself and to share more about your story and who you are. Maybe you were bold enough to truly say yes to a big opportunity. Or you were bold enough to say no.

Boldness can be such a gift, can't it? An important quality to poses for us to truly make a difference. But is boldness a quality we always want? Can you think of a time when, perhaps, you were too bold? Maybe you said something bold that you immediately regretted, and afterwards, it was like trying to put toothpaste back into the tube. You just couldn't take it back.

Maybe you've been too bold in speaking back to your parents or to someone you love. Often times, we are far more bold with close family members or friends than we would ever be with someone else. Maybe you said something bold that hurt someone else, without even considering how they might feel. Maybe your boldness was offensive, or disingenuous, or even rude.

I still remember one time in middle school, our teacher was asking the class to respond to a question, and everyone in the class had to answer. Most of my classmates were mumbling over their words or speaking quietly in their seats, and the teacher kept asking them to speak louder so that she could hear them. And she was growing frustrated that no one in the class would speak up. So when my turn came, I thought it would be funny to yell my response as loud as I possibly could. My classmates giggled in their seats, but the teacher did not think it was funny at all. My boldness that day was rude and inconsiderate.

Sometimes boldness is an incredible quality to have. Other times, perhaps boldness can go too far. And sometimes, it's tough to know the difference, isn't it? Which leads to my next question, and that is, "When was the last time you spoke about your faith with boldness?" And what does that even look like for us as Pentecost people, as people who are following the Spirit?

It's a trickier question, isn't it? But I think today's text in Acts chapter 4 offers particular insight to help us begin to answer it. In Acts 4, Peter and John are speaking with boldness about their faith in Christ – and people are responding positively to them. In fact, verse 4 tells us that about 5000 people had come to believe in Christ because of their preaching. But all this public attention begins to rile up the temple authorities, prompting them to arrest Peter and John. After all, boldness often doesn't come without consequences.

And Peter's boldness is particularly interesting to me, because just chapters earlier in Luke's gospel, Peter is the disciple who denies even knowing Jesus. Peter makes a complete 180 here. He goes from pretending like he doesn't even know who Jesus is (not once but three times) to getting arrested for preaching so boldly about who Jesus is! What is it that brings about such a significant change within him?

As I shared a couple of weeks ago that gospel singer Marion Williams would say, "It's the Spirit of God, Honey! It makes a little voice big, a shy person brave, and takes an ordinary dim, little life and makes it a bright life for the world." And this week, we learn that the Spirit of God gives us boldness.

I called one of my favorite Luke and Acts scholars, Andy Arterbury from Truett Seminary, this weekend to see what he could tell me about boldness in Acts. And without even knowing the topic of this worship series, he said this:

"In Acts, boldness refers to frank and open speech that is empowered by the Spirit." And he went on to tell me all the different times that boldness is used throughout the book Acts. The word "boldness" is mentioned three times within today's text in Acts 4. But it's also used to describe Peter's preaching at Pentecost in Acts 2, and to describe Paul's preaching in Rome in the very last verse of Acts, where it says, "He lived there two whole years and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

When Peter and John are arrested and the authorities command them to keep quiet, they respond by saying, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; but we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." And then, they continue to pray for God to give them "boldness" in verse 29. I don't know about you, but if I, like Peter and John, had been arrested for a clash with the temple authorities, I would have been praying for protection and safety and deliverance. Praying for boldness is a pretty brave and defiant act, isn't it?

And by doing so, they are showing us that boldness is an important characteristic of anyone who is brave enough to follow the Spirit in the book of Acts. But is boldness still important to us today? Is our speech – our conversations about our faith – characterized by boldness? And perhaps a more honest question is, are you and I speaking about and having conversations about our faith at all?

Religion writer Jonathan Merritt came out with a book last month about this very idea. A few years ago, Jonathan moved from the Bible Belt of the south to New York City, and he suddenly found himself struggling to know how to talk about his faith with people in ways that were authentic and real. He said, many people didn't even understand the language he grew up using to talk about his faith. For instance, on his first Sunday in NYC, he was standing at the subway station on his way to church when a woman standing beside him asked where he was going. He said he was going to worship, and she looked at him puzzled, because she had actually never heard that term used before. A woman living in New York City had never heard of a worship service. He was absolutely blown away.

It sparked an idea within him, and Jonathan started doing research with the Barna group about the conversations people in America are having about faith. And after interviewing over a thousand people, their study revealed that more than three quarters of Americans don't speak about matters of faith often. More than 1/5 of respondents admit they have not had a spiritual conversation at all in the past year. 3/5 said they only talked about faith on a rare occasion.

Jonathan writes, "Despite wide-spread religiosity in our country, 7% of Americans say they talk about spiritual matters on about a once-per-week basis. That means that for most of us, our conversations almost never address the spirituality we claim as important."

"When it comes to practicing Christians who attend church regularly," he said, "I expected the frequency of spiritual conversations to skyrocket. But I was wrong, wrong, wrong. Only 13% of practicing Christians had a spiritual conversation more than once a week. That means only about 1 in 8 self-identifying Christians speak about God with regular frequency."¹

Friends, what is it that is holding us back from speaking about who God is and what God is doing in our lives? If our faith is as significant to us as I believe it is, why are you and I often more willing to talk with people about the weather and our favorite Netflix series and our weekend plans than we are about our faith in the God of the universe?

Maybe it's that we've been turned off by people who speak about their faith too boldly – with an "I'm right and you're wrong" kind of mentality. Maybe we have seen more harm than good come from people speaking about their faith in ways that lack authenticity and sometimes seem to be emotionally manipulative. Maybe we have heard people talk about their faith using cliché phrases that seem more like a sales-pitch for a new vacuum cleaner rather than something that is genuine and real and life-changing. And maybe we don't want to be associated with a faith like that.

But, is it also possible that we have reacted to the extent that we no longer talk about our faith at all? That the idea of speaking with the boldness of Peter and John and the earliest disciples

¹ Jonathan Merritt, *Learning to Speak God from Scratch—Why Sacred Words are Vanishing, and How We Can Revive Them*

has become completely foreign to us? If that is the case, I wonder it would look like if we were to reimagine what talking about our faith with boldness could look like in today's world.

This week, I was on Hilton Head island in South Carolina for a few days on vacation with my family. And the beach is my happy place. I could sit and watch the waves and let the water cascade over my feet for hours every day and be perfectly content.

On my last afternoon at the beach, I had just dozed off to sleep under the umbrella, with the sound of the waves in the background and my favorite music in my headphones, when a woman came running up to me and said, "Are you Mary Alice? Because I just met your dad at the pool and heard that you are a pastor, and I *couldn't wait* to come talk to you."

Now, I'll admit that talking with this woman about faith – or about anything for that matter – was the last thing I wanted to do in that moment under my umbrella in my happy place on my last day at the beach.

But the more the lady talked, the more she shared such genuine passion for following Christ and the work of the church and what that looks like in her life. She spoke with an authentic boldness that I haven't encountered in some time. It wasn't in your face. It wasn't over-the-top. It wasn't artificial. It was genuine. And joyful. And vulnerable. And refreshing. She couldn't help but talk about it, just like those earliest disciples. And not only did it wake me up from my nap, but it woke something up within my soul.

I'm struck by the words Andy shared with me about what boldness means in Acts. Nowhere does it imply that boldness means being presumptive or offensive or over-bearing. It doesn't mean being disingenuous or manipulative. Instead, he said, "Boldness, in Acts, is frank and open speech that is empowered by the Spirit." And that's a version of boldness that I can absolutely get around. Boldness that isn't a middle schooler yelling over everyone in the room, but a woman at the beach speaking joyfully and wholeheartedly about what God is doing in her life.

What would that kind of boldness look like for you and me? What would it look like for Calvary? How might you and I become people who are willing to paint in the big and bold and beautiful colors of the Spirit?

I believe that kind of boldness means being brave enough to engage with each other face to face instead of on Twitter or social media.

I believe that kind of boldness means speaking up about the injustices around us. Not staying silent about the things and the people that matter to us, because they matter to Jesus.

I believe that kind of boldness requires listening and empathy and compassion just as much, if not sometimes more, than it requires speaking. Otherwise, we're just a middle schooler yelling over everyone else in the classroom, aren't we?

I believe that kind of boldness involves a willingness to truly be vulnerable and real with one another. It's why we try to offer unique ways for people to share in worship at Calvary, whether that is through testimonies that give us the chance to hear from different voices about what God is doing in our lives, or in small group conversations or passing the mic around the room, things that sometimes make us feel a little awkward or uncomfortable but invite us to be bold and to share with one another and to hear from one another in a deeper way.

It's also why we will be launching a series of fall small groups at Calvary this fall: groups of 10-12 people who will meet in homes each week to respond to what we have encountered in worship and to go beyond the kinds of conversations we have together on Sunday mornings.

I hope you'll be bold enough to join a group this fall – particularly a group where you may not know many of the other people participating. And I hope you'll be bold enough to be real with your group – to share with them and receive from them in an authentic way. Our faith family needs these kinds of spaces – but they're only as real as you allow them to be. Maybe we need God to give Calvary greater boldness to show up in this way.

I believe that the kind of boldness that we see in Acts looks a lot like joy and authenticity and an eagerness to share about all that God is doing in our lives – whether we are at church or at school or in a small group or meeting someone new while we're sitting under the umbrella at the beach.

And ultimately, I believe that kind of boldness looks like Jesus. Jesus was always meeting new people in the midst of their everyday lives. Hearing their stories. Sharing his own. Befriending people whom the rest of the world was afraid to touch or ever be around. Speaking the truth. Sharing the good news. Not shying away from hard conversations. Loving unconditionally. When you think about it, every day of Jesus' life was characterized by boldness.

And so, as we seek to walk in the way of Jesus, may we be people who cannot keep from speaking boldly about all that God is doing in and among us. And may with be brave enough to live each day in the boldness of the Spirit of God.

After all, "It's the Spirit of God, honey. It makes a little voice big, a shy person brave, and takes an ordinary dim, little life and makes it a bright life for the world."