**September 24, 2023 *Acts 4:23-31***

***Loving Accountability in Action***

**Scripture: *Acts 4:23-31 NRSV***

*(23) After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. (24) When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, (25) it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? (26) The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' (27) For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, (28) to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. (29) And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, (30) while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (31) When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.*

**Notes:**

1. They decide on a ***spiritual*** action plan.
   1. They gathered for ***prayer***.
   2. They ***acknowledged*** the sovereignty of God.
   3. They recounted God’s incredible ***power***.
   4. They ***recited*** Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit,
   5. They recalled all that Herod and Pilate did to ***conspire*** against Jesus,
   6. They gave ***glory*** to the Lord.
2. ***Consider*** the prayer requests,
   1. They did not pray the religious leaders ***destruction***.
   2. They did not pray for an end to their ***persecutions***.
   3. They did not pray for God to change the ***mission***.
3. They ***prayed*** for two important things.
   1. They prayed for renewed ***strength***.
   2. They prayed for God to work in ***miraculous*** ways
4. What would happen if we would ***pray*** with the same desire,
   1. Would we pray for ***miraculous*** events
   2. Ask the Lord for ***direction***.

**Script:**

Do you remember the feeling you had when you first submitted to the will of the Holy Spirit when you repented and was of your sin. What did you do? Where did you go? Who did you tell? How did you act? How was your life changed on that day? I believe that I shared that on the day that I was saved I felt as if I was in the middle of a tug of war between Satan and Jesus. Satan was not leaving go of me, but to my good fortune, neither was Jesus. When I finally surrendered to Jesus, I rose from the altar, exhausted and emotionally wrought. Don’t get me wrong, I was happy to know of my new relationship with Jesus, but the battle waged for my soul just played me out. After I was back on my feet, still standing at the altar, the pastor asked me, “Kevin, tell us what the Lord has done for you today.” I did not know how to explain it and my response was that I was just speechless.

I have heard of others who got up from the altar and danced their way back to the pew they were sitting in. I have heard of those who rose from the altar singing and giving praises to the Lord. And, I have heard of those who quietly rose and humbly returned to their seats. I guess what I am saying is that we all react differently to the grace of Jesus. We all do not have the same personality so there is no established or uniform way to react to the grace of Jesus.

Which brings me to the story of Pentecost. On that day all of the believers in the upper room, received the infilling of the Holy Spirit. What appeared to be tongues of fire danced upon their heads. They began to speak, and some spoke in a language they had never spoken or even heard before. They left the upper room and began to speak to the people in the streets in their own language so everybody was able to understand what was being told to them. This began a revival within Jerusalem, amongst the Jewish people present. Peter and John began preaching wherever they went, and they were arrested and brought before the Council, who sternly warned them to stop preaching in the manner that they had been. And, that brings us to our sermon passage for today in Acts 4 verses 23-31

*(23) After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. (24) When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, (25) it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? (26) The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.' (27) For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, (28) to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. (29) And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, (30) while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (31) When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness. Acts 4:23-31 NRSV*

God unleashed His powerful Holy Spirit on the waiting disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). That event not only brought the infilling of the Holy Spirit to the disciples but also released the disciples to witness about their risen Lord in the streets of Jerusalem and surrounding area. The disciples extended the invitation, and hundreds and then thousands of listeners joined the small band of disciples. The Jewish religious leaders immediately realized that five thousand new believers threatened their authority.

They responded by arresting Peter and John and putting them in jail (4:1-3). They could not dispute the validity of the testimony of the disciples, so they warned them to quit witnessing about Jesus's resurrection and saving power and then released them. Today’s text illustrates loving accountability in action within the early church.

Consider the affinity group (Acts 4:23). Now you are going to ask me, what is an affinity group? An affinity group is a group of people who have something in common. Wikipedia states, “An affinity group is a group formed around a shared interest or common goal, to which individuals formally or informally belong. Affinity groups are generally precluded from being under the guidance of any governmental agency, and their purposes must be primarily non-commercial.” In this particular situation the affinity group is this budding movement known as The Way. They were the followers and disciples of Jesus Christ; and their purpose is to fulfill the mission of Jesus Christ. It would be many years until they would be identified as Christians, that is why we do not see that term in scripture, but this affinity group would eventually be known as Christians.

So again, I say, consider this affinity group. The newly released believers could go anywhere they wanted to go in Jerusalem. They could go to their homes, to their places of employment, to coffee shops or places to eat. And so, Peter and John chose to go immediately to the group with which they most identified: “their own people,” fellow believers.

They belonged with this affinity group, the people of The Way, these Christians, and we eventually will refer to them as the church. Here they found emotional and spiritual support. They found encouragement. They found accountability. They found an inviting group of friends that encouraged them to be themselves, so they did not have to be phony. They found partners in ministry. They found a family.

So, when they arrived what did they do? What was the action plan? They could have conducted a committee meeting and devised the best way to avoid further attention by religious authorities; they did not do this. They could have decided to take their treatment by religious authorities to the public and expose the ways they were being mistreated and even targeted; they did not do this. They could have decided that the threats of the religious leaders put their freedom, and perhaps their very lives, at risk and they could have simply given up; they did not do this.

What did they do? They decided on a spiritual action plan. They set an example that we should be quick to follow. First, they gathered for prayer. Our verse says they raised their voices to the Lord and prayed for direction. They acknowledged the sovereignty of God. They recounted God’s incredible power to create “*… who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them,”* They recited Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit, *“…Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? (26) The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.”* They recalled all that Herod and Pilate did to conspire against Jesus, *“…both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus,”* They gave glory to the Lord, recognizing His majesty, honor, and power.

And then they petitioned Him, considering the prayer requests, “*And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”* They did not pray for God to destroy the religious leaders. While they might have thought that would be one direction to go, they stepped back and considered what Jesus would have done. They did not pray for the persecutions against them to cease. I am sure there is not one of them who wanted to be persecuted, I do not know of any who would have wanted to be arrested or thrown in a roman prison. They did not pray that God would change the mission to which he had called them. I am certain they would have enjoyed a cushier task, maybe to stand along the roadway and hold up signs; perhaps ministering to the homeless with a warm meal; they would not likely be persecuted or arrested for that surely.

They did not pray for any of these things, although they would have been welcomed. Instead, they prayed for two important things. What do you think they would have prayed for? What did they truly need to fulfill all that the Father had called them to? They prayed for renewed strength to preach the gospel message of Jesus with “great boldness”. And the strength they prayed for was not just physical strength, there was also the emotional strength needed to continue moving in the right direction, the direction that God had pointed to. They also prayed for psychological strength as well. Strength to not allow Satan to get into their heads and make them overthink the situation and doubt their decisions.

They also prayed for God to work in miraculous ways to magnify “the name of your holy servant Jesus” (v. 30). Yes they prayed that they would have the emotional strength to do the difficult things even when they were discouraged. They prayed that they would not overthink the task and doubt themselves. These are good things to pray for, but to pray that the Lord would work in miraculous ways was asking the Lord to produce evidence that the Lord was actually working in their midst and they would not be able to take credit for the things that would happen. That was their prayer, that is what they asked for.

What happened next testified to the unity of the believers and the pleasure of God. God was indeed pleased with this affinity group, with these followers of The Way, these Christians, this church. God was pleased with their action plan. God was pleased with their prayer requests. What happened next is miraculous; the meeting place was physically shaken much like an earthquake. God blessed them with a new infilling with the Holy Spirit, reminiscent of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. God emboldened them with new spiritual courage; and, they continued to preach the gospel message of Jesus Christ throughout Jerusalem, Judea, and ultimately to the ends of the earth.

I wonder what would happen if we would pray with the same desire, a desire to see the Lord’s will and work done here in this community. I wonder what would happen if we were to pray with the same conviction that these first century Christians prayed with? I wonder what great things would be accomplished in this community if we would pray for the strength of the Lord to break loose and flood this community with the Holy Spirit? What would you pray for? Who would you pray for? Would you pray that your unsaved loved ones would come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior? Maybe we would pray for our loved ones who are standing on the edge, trying to live in two worlds; yes they come to church, but they are lukewarm, they come because it is the thing to do, but they do not see the urgency of helping others find the Lord as Savior. Would we pray for miraculous healings, miraculous revivals, miraculous events that only the Lord is able to do? DO we have that much faith? Do we have that much compassion? Do we have that much love for our fellow man, our neighbors?

We serve the same God the disciples served two thousand years ago. He is as interested today in spreading the gospel message of Jesus to the ends of the earth as he was two thousand years ago. We do not have any greater personal ability to succeed in the mission of God than the first disciples did. But we do have access to the unlimited ability of God to work mightily through our groups, our church, and into our community. What is our action plan, and what are our prayer requests?

Today I invite you to come to this altar and pray. Who will you pray for? What will you pray for? How do you want to see the Lord move in our church, or community, and in our world. I urge you to pray for His mighty hand to send revival into our hearts, as he sends us into this world to love and reach out to those who are hurting, to those who are struggling, and to those who are lost. As you pray, ask the Lord for direction so you will know what you are being called to do. Pray for clarity of direction, pray for a willingness to go into the unknown and be His Hands and Feet

May God do for us what he did for the early church as we partner together in God’s mission!