

June 2, 2013

A Gospel Centered Community

The Rock of Offense

Acts 4:1 – 22

We are engaged in a study of the book of the Acts of the Apostles – an eyewitness account by Luke the physician, of the early church. However, given the content and nature of this book, it should be more properly called ***The Acts of the Risen Lord by the Holy Spirit in and through the Church*** because the book of Acts is about Jesus and His continued work by the Holy Spirit through the lives of His people. Luke tells us this in the opening sentence of this book, *“In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach...”* In other words, Luke is telling us that his first volume, his gospel account, was about what the incarnate Jesus **began** to do and teach and the clear inference is that this second volume is about what the resurrected and glorified Jesus **continues** to do and teach, no longer in the flesh, but by the Holy Spirit.

It is, as Ben preached last week, the 'Already – Not Yet' appearance of the Kingdom of God, where the church lives among this broken, crooked, generation as agents of gospel restoration, demonstrating in our lives the realities of the Kingdom as God's redeemed community. It is Jesus at work, by the Holy Spirit through the church in the world. As we proclaim the good news of the gospel, **far as the curse is found**, we bring others into the reality of what life was meant to be. As we lovingly serve the broken and the hurting, the resentful and the scoffers, we are announcing that the Kingdom of God has come and proclaiming the sure and certain hope that one day all wrongs will be righted, all sadness turned to joy, all weeping into laughter and God's perfect creation perfectly restored.

This is what Peter preached there in chapter three, calling them to repent, proclaiming the hope of restoration, and pointing them to Jesus. And we read that many who heard this message believed about 5000 the text tells us. But there were some who were upset, they were annoyed, they were offended. They were so upset and offended by the message that they arrested Peter and John and threw them into the pokey overnight. They apparently didn't have a problem with the miracle of a man who had never walked – suddenly walking and leaping around. But they did have a problem with the message. And this is at the heart of this passage this morning. The gospel **is** good news – to those who are being saved. But it is a great offense to those who won't believe. We should expect great acceptance – and great opposition when we proclaim the gospel.

We should expect that when the word goes out, it will awaken dead hearts to life, and it will be received joyfully and fruitfully. But we also must know that the gospel will offend as well. Let's look at the passage: *And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. Acts 4:1-3* When Luke records that the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees were greatly annoyed – it is a little bit of an understatement. I get greatly annoyed by some things, but I've never been so annoyed that I lay hands on someone and put them in prison. The word here indicates that these guys were really worked up about this – it means they were greatly angered, deeply grieved – in other words, they were massively offended. And the cause of the offense, again, was not the miracle – it was the preaching of the gospel.

In this text you have kind of a spectrum of people groups that you wouldn't normally see working together, linking arms to oppose the gospel. You have the rulers and leaders and the soldiers. You have the politicians and the priests. And then you have the sophisticated, inclusive liberals, the Sadducees; and the narrow-minded, intolerant Pharisees, like Annas and Caiphas. The Sadducees were what we might call the religious liberals. They believed that morality was necessary for civic order, but they didn't believe in any other part of the Bible or religion. They didn't believe in the supernatural or miracles; they didn't believe in the resurrection or the spiritual world. They were essentially secular religionists – moral rationalists. And on the other side of things you had the teachers of the law – the Pharisees. These guys were the religious fundamentalists of their day. They believed in all of it – the resurrection, the miracles, the supernatural – everything. And normally these various groups hated each other. But here we see them all united in their

vicious opposition to the gospel.

And the opposition to the gospel is not based on any rational argument – anyone who says that is either lying or incredibly blind to their own offense. People will often frame their opposition to the gospel on the basis of errors in the biblical text, or the impossibility of miracles, or the illogic of believing in God or even the bad behavior of people who call themselves Christians. And it is true as G.K. Chesterton once observed that *'...the best argument against Christianity is Christians.'* But mostly, people try to frame their arguments on the basis of rationality and logic. One famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, even has a website that proclaims: *"Our mission is to support scientific education and critical thinking to overcome religious fundamentalism, superstition, intolerance and suffering."* But that is not why people are opposed to the gospel – those are reasons they give, but that's not the whole story. People are not opposed to the gospel for rational reasons.

On April 16, 2010 the NCAA implemented a new rule banning any writing on the eye black of college football players. This ban comes on the heels of the career of **Tim Tebow** who is known for writing references to Bible verses on his eye black as seen in this picture. Many have named this ban the "Tebow Ban" or the "Tebow Rule." It is interesting that nothing was ever said about former star athlete **Reggie Bush**, from USC, who always wore eye-black with "619" written on them. The number "619" represents the area code of Bush's home town of San Diego, California. So, what was so offensive about Tim Tebow's message? Simple, Tebow's message contained the Gospel – it contained the truth. The Bible says that the truth of the Gospel message is offensive, as it is written, *"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense..."* **Romans 9:33**

In this text we see this conglomeration of different groups, normally at odds, absolutely united in fierce opposition to the gospel and it is not based on rational arguments. They even admit that the miracle that happened – really happened. Wait a minute, slow down, walk that by me again. Here is a guy – he's never walked – he's forty years old. Have you ever seen someone who has lost the use of their legs for even one year? There's nothing left. Even if he could walk – what would he walk with? His legs are basically skin and bone – no muscle to speak of. And yet this guy goes running and jumping through the temple. That's a miracle – that's a power no one really understands. That's something that should cut right across all your notions of logical and rational. But it doesn't. These guys still say 'We know this happened, but how can we stop these guys preaching?' By itself, a miracle like this doesn't scientifically prove that God exists, it doesn't prove the message of the gospel – but it should start you thinking. And the funny thing is – it doesn't. Something deeper is at work.

If rational argument were sufficient, then **Pascal's Wager** would be enough. Blaise Pascal was a very smart man *and* a devoted follower of Christ. But he had a lot of friends who were adamantly opposed to Christianity and so with impeccable logic he would lay out his argument and it goes like this, "If you believe in God and turn out to be incorrect, you have lost nothing -- but if you don't believe in God and turn out to be incorrect, you've lost everything. Therefore it is foolish to be an atheist." In other words, people wager with their lives whether or not God exists. If you believe and it turns out that He does not exist and the gospel is a hoax, you've only lost finitely. But if He exists, and He did send His Son to die for our sins, and you don't believe, you lose infinitely. And almost no one took him up on this. In spite of the brilliance of his logic – his friends' opposition to Christianity and the gospel was vociferous, vigorous and even vicious. And Pascal said, 'There's something driving my friends to repudiate the gospel and it is not reason.' Something else is going on here.

The real reason people are opposed to the gospel is that it is incredibly offensive to the human heart. People are offended by the idea that they have done anything worthy of death. They're offended by the idea of an ultimate authority to which they find themselves accountable. People find it insulting to be told that they are too weak and sinful to do anything to contribute to their salvation. The gospel is offensive to liberals who charge the gospel with intolerance, because it says that the only way to be saved is through the cross. The gospel is offensive to conservatives because it says that, without the cross, 'good' people are in as much trouble as 'bad' people.

Ultimately, the gospel is offensive because the cross stands against every plan of self-salvation.

The gospel tells us that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves and we need a Savior. The world appreciates 'religion' and 'morality' in general; but hates the application in particular. They want to define their own morality and not have it imposed. So people who love the gospel, who love the cross, are persecuted irrationally. The cross is by nature offensive! And we can only grasp its sweetness if we first grapple with its offense. If someone understands the gospel and embraces the cross, it is either the greatest thing in their life, or the worst offense. If it is neither the sweetest truth or the most damnable lie, they really haven't understood it. If you really understand the message of the gospel, the one thing you cannot be is indifferent.

The gospel is offensive because it claims ultimate authority. Look at what they say to Peter and John: *On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"* Acts 4:5-7 Literally the Greek puts it like this: *'By what power or name did this **you**?'* In the Greek the final emphasis is on '**you**'. 'Who do **you** think you are? By what authority do **you** do this? On what basis do **you** presume to heal people and teach something different? Who are **you**?'

At the deepest level, people's rejection of the gospel is a rejection of the authority of Jesus. And because the gospel is proclaimed by people just like them, the assumption is that they were somehow presuming some sort of authority over them. But it is the cutting word of the gospel that strikes the soul and touches off the hidden rebellion of the unregenerate heart. What the priests and the Sadducees and the Pharisees saw was the free and fearless confidence of Peter and John that could only come from a higher authority. Look at verse 13: *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.* **Acts 4:13** These were despised Galileans, unlettered, unsophisticated, untaught fishermen, teaching and healing with boldness, with authority, and they were astonished. The gospel is offensive because it brings rebellious human hearts face to face with the ultimate authority in the universe.

The gospel is offensive because convinces and convicts men of sin. No one likes to be told they're a sinner. Look at verse 8: *Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, **whom you crucified**, whom God raised from the dead--by him this man is standing before you well.* Acts 4:8-10 The gospel presents us with the truth that we crucified Christ. All of us -- the whole human race, every sinner who has ever lived -- crucified Jesus. Human evil -- the greed, the indifference to the sufferings of others, the deceit, the lust, the injustice, the violence, the oppression, the sins of apartheid and genocide -- the whole tide of human woe engulfed the innocent Son of God and crushed out his life at the cross. The human race stands condemned for the death of Jesus.

And this is what offended them. And this is what offends us; and it is what pierces our hearts. You're not a Christian until your heart has been pierced by the truth that your sins crucified the Lord of life. Remember the words of that hymn by John Newton?: ***My conscience felt and owned the guilt, and plunged me in despair, I saw my sins His blood had spilt, and helped to nail Him there. Alas I knew not what I did, but now my tears are vain, where shall my trembling soul be hid, for I the Lord have slain.*** You might be convicted that you broke God's rules, but real conversion tells you that you broke God's heart. ***And it is the realization that you were the one who pierced His heart with your spear that first offends you to the core, and then pierces you to the heart.***

The gospel is offensive because it shakes our foundations. Look at verse 11: *This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.* Acts 4:11 Every human being has a bottom line that becomes their foundation, the cornerstone for their entire life. We're all builders. That's what Peter was referring to -- *the stone that was rejected by you, the builders.* Everybody has a cornerstone for their life, and they're building on it. Everybody has something that they make their ultimate value and it becomes the foundation for your security, for your understanding, for your power, the basis for every decision you make. Your cornerstone might be your education, or your morality, or your family, or your career, or the accumulation of wealth -- it could be any number of things. Whatever it is, **that** becomes your confidence, your security, the basis for your self-esteem. It becomes your wisdom.

And everything in your life is judged by your cornerstone. The way you view the world, the way you see relationships, the answers you have for the problems in life are all built on the cornerstone of your life. That's why the gospel shakes these people -- here's why the gospel doesn't just offend them intellectually, or rationally. And it's isn't even so much the issue of the resurrection that bothers them; because the Sadducees and the Pharisees would have had an argument if they got to talking about the resurrection. That's not the real problem. The real problem's not intellectual. The real problem is that their foundation has been shaken. The gospel comes and it points to your cornerstone and says, '**That's inadequate**'.

Whatever you've been building on is exposed by the gospel as absolutely inadequate. Your money can't save you – your career can't save you – your education, or your morality or your family won't save you. The gospel comes to everyone and says 'All have sinned – everyone is a sinner and stands under the wrath of God'. The gospel shakes every foundation. It comes to the Pharisees here and says, 'Your goodness and law keeping won't save you. In fact tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you'. (Matthew 21:31) And it comes to the Sadducees and says 'Your wisdom and sophistication won't save you. Unless you become like a little child you won't enter the kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 18:3) The gospel speaks to the wise and to the foolish, to the rich and the poor, to the moral and the immoral, to the philosopher and the peasant and says, 'Unless you believe in the One who lived the life you should have lived and died the death that you should have died, you are eternally lost'. And it offended them. It rocked their foundation. It shook their cornerstone.

The gospel comes after your foundation, your cornerstone and it shakes you up. And everyone, except Christians, have a cornerstone that is too weak and too frail for the weight and the freight of the whole building. And here's why. If you have built on your career, if you've built on your success, if you've built on your goodness, if you've built on your money, whatever your cornerstone is – it is unstable. It's unstable because it's subject to your performance, it's subject to someone else's performance, it's subject to circumstances. And you're always a bit nervous, you're not sure, things can change. Unless you've built on the cornerstone, you're unsure how things will turn out.

But this is what kills people about Christians. This is what makes people hate Christians. This is why the argument is never about logic or rational, or evidence. Christians are sure. Their cornerstone is solid and unmoving. It's their confidence, their boldness – **when they saw the boldness of Peter and John**. A Christian is someone who says 'I know that God loves me. I know that He knows me to the bottom and loves me anyway. I know that I'm saved. I know that my Redeemer lives. I know I don't deserve it and I can't earn it and yet grace abounds'. Christians are those who have been so radically humbled that they're sure. And people hate that. And yet that is the very thing that pierces the hearts of proud men and brings them to Christ.

Nathan Cole was a farmer in Weathersfield, Connecticut in October of 1740 when George Whitfield came to town. Like thousands of other farmers, Nathan left his farm to go hear the young Whitfield preach. You can read his account of that on line, but here is part of what he wrote about that event: ***"When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the scaffold he lookt almost angelical; a young, Slim, slender, youth before some thousands of people with a bold undaunted countenance, and my hearing how God was with him every where he came along it solemnized my mind; and put me into a trembling fear before he began to preach; for he looked as if he was clothed with authority from the Great God; and a sweet solemn solemnity sat upon his brow And my hearing him preach, gave me a heart wound; By Gods blessings: my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me."***

Lastly, **The gospel is offensive because it is exclusive**. There is only one way to God, and it's not yours. Look at verse 12: ***And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*** Acts 4:12 This is probably the most offensive thing about Christianity. There's no give here. There's no tolerance. There's not an inch of wiggle room. ***There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved!*** There are no other possibilities. And people don't like this – it's too confining, too restricting, there are no grey areas – and people like to operate in the gray areas.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses this image of the cornerstone to drive home the point that there are really only two options to consider. ***Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes"? ... And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him."*** Matthew 21:42-44 You can either fall on the rock, have your old foundation broken up, and be saved, or the rock will fall on you and crush you. If you've built on any other foundation, this rock will offend you, it will expose the shaky supports on which you've built everything. And it's supposed to. Because anything less than Jesus as your cornerstone is inadequate. What is your cornerstone? What is it you have been building on. Let the Cornerstone do His offending work and begin building on the only sure thing in this falling apart world, Jesus, the Rock of our salvation.

Our gracious God and loving Father,

We sing with the psalmist this morning, 'I love you, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my Rock, in whom I take refuge, my Shield, and the Horn of my salvation, my Stronghold. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised'. We thank You this morning that You are our Rock, our precious cornerstone, a sure foundation, and 'Whoever believes in You will not be shaken.' Holy Spirit, come and destroy our confidence in anything other than Christ our Cornerstone. We would not trust in anything but the cross of Christ that has secured our salvation, granted us faith to grasp eternal life, hope to lift our heads, and love to bind us forever to Him who died and rose for us. May we be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.