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Sermon 22 May 2022

Title: The Rising Church Sermon 5: Truth to Power

(Acts 4:1-22)

- Good morning church family, and welcome again to LargsNaz Online—I want to begin today by letting you know that there are going to be some changes happening to this, our online service—and those changes will be happening on June 5—that’s 2 weeks from today—on Pentecost Sunday—and what will be happening is that we’ll be transitioning from a pre-recorded video to a live, in person service at the church. And so beginning on June 5th, the name of this video that you’ll see each week will change from “LargsNaz Online” to “LargsNaz Live” because what you’ll see in this video will be what took place at the church on Sunday morning. Now, because of that this video won’t be uploaded until sometime on Sunday—but it will be available by the end of that day—so if you check our YouTube channel on Saturday June 4th or on the morning of Sunday June 5th, you won’t see a new video—but don’t panic—just remember that’s because our videos will be uploaded during the day on Sunday—and you can watch our Facebook page for a notification when it has been uploaded or you can just check back—and then that video will be available from then on, whenever you want to watch it. So remember, on Sunday the 5th of June, LargsNaz Online becomes LargsNaz Live, and the video will be available by the end of the day each Sunday. We hope you’ll

continue to join us, and that you'll enjoy and be blessed by the ability to see what happens at our in-person gathering—and if you can, when you're in the area, we hope you'll join us at 21 Aitken Street here in Largs—our doors open at 10:15 am for a time of fellowship and sharing a bite to eat together and then our service begins at 11. We'd love to welcome you to our table.

- This is Week 5 of our Rising Church series—the penultimate Sunday—next Sunday will be the final sermon in this series and also the last sermon before we change our format—but in this series we have been looking at the book of Acts and asking, among other things, “What can the church in the so-called Post-Christian age learn from the church in the pre-Christian age?” What can we learn from the stories of the early days of the church, in this age when it seems that the Christian church is losing or has lost some of its power—some of its cultural and political influence—its meaning to the average person and its impact and importance in their lives—its power—or at least a certain kind of power
- Now if you have been paying attention and I do hope you have been, you have likely noticed that POWER has been a recurrent theme as we have looked at the Book of Acts these past few Sundays—we have talked a lot about POWER
- When we began this series with the ascension of Jesus we saw that the disciples were interested in whether-- and when-- Jesus was going to restore Israel's political power—and Jesus tells them they're going to receive power as he has promised,

- And they do receive that power at Pentecost, and people are amazed because they recognize their own languages, and then we heard about Peter's powerfully prophetic sermon (that we said had similarities to JTB's at the beginning of Luke's gospel), and we talked about the POWER of the PEG and the way that Peter's Personality, his experience and his gifts are empowered by the Holy Spirit and the way that he is transformed from a fearful denier of Jesus to a bold proclaimer of the truth of the gospel—we saw how the POWER of the Spirit enables him to speak clearly and directly to the crowds in Jerusalem, telling them "you all with the help of the Roman Empire, crucified the Messiah—you had that power, but the power of God responded and God raised him up, so repent—and they do and we heard about thousands of baptisms and the way that the power of the Holy Spirit fills these multitudes
- Then last week we heard about the power of the name of Jesus and the healing of the lame beggar at the gate of the temple, but also about the power of the SYSTEM that was represented by the temple, built by Herod--we heard about the power of the Roman Empire and the Hebrew authorities to keep this beggar in his place—but that's a power that is no match for the name of Jesus and so we saw that same beggar jump up, and enter into the Temple, no longer unclean, no longer outside the gate, because that's what happens when the power of the System meets the power of the Saviour
- And last week we heard that the folks who were in the temple saw the beggar and recognized him, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at

what happened to him—and it is to those crowds that Peter preaches again there in Chapter 3, and his preaching has the same theme that we’ve heard before—Jesus IS the long-awaited messiah, and you crucified him, but God raised him up, so repent—

- And when we come to the end of Chapter 3, Peter is in the middle of preaching to the people at the Temple who have seen and recognized the lame beggar healed and are amazed and astonished—
- And that brings us to our scripture today, verses 1 through 22 of Chapter 4
- Today’s sermon is entitled “truth to power” because I want to suggest that what we find in these 22 verses is an example of that phrase that we hear used every now and then in our contemporary setting, the phrase “speaking truth to power”
- And as we walk through the text and look together at what we find there, I believe the Holy Spirit has a message for each one of us this morning—and for the church as a whole if we have ears to hear it
- Now we said that Peter—and John as well-- were in the middle of speaking to the people who had seen them heal the lame beggar, who is now “clinging to them” as they speak to the crowd, and then Luke tells us that
- While Peter and John^a were **speaking** to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the **Sadducees** came to them, ²much annoyed **because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.** ³So they arrested them and put them **in custody** until the next day, for it was already evening. ⁴But many of those who **heard** the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

- Now who are these people who show up here—the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees? Simply, they are the powers-that-be—The priests are obviously the religious authorities associated with the Temple—and the captain, along with his troops, he keeps order—he preserves the peace—kind of like the Temple police—they make sure people who belong on the outside stay outside, on the other side of the gates-- and Luke tells us that they are accompanied by the Sadducees
- But who are THEY? Sadducees are members of the upper social and economic class in Jerusalem—and they maintain the Temple—now in terms of their beliefs they are ultra-conservatives—fundamentalists, you might say—because they acknowledge the authority of the written law ONLY, the written Torah, the Pentateuch—the first 5 books of the Old Testament, the Books of Moses-- and they didn't acknowledge the authority of the ORAL law, which distinguished them from the Pharisees (who wrote so many laws you had to be an expert to remember them all)—and because the Sadducees only acknowledge the written Torah, they don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, because it's not in there--and so, since they don't believe in it, Jesus' resurrection cannot have happened and Peter and John need to stop preaching about it, because they're annoyed by this—they are displeased and unhappy about it--they're Sadd, you see?
- but it's not just that Peter and John are proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead, that has them concerned, it's also that they're

- Teaching the people—remember that this is about power—and Peter and John are overstepping their authority—they are not in a position to teach these people—they need to stay in their place—and even worse, they’ve brought a person who is unclean, from birth—into the Temple with them—you can’t do that—there are gates for a reason—they don’t just let people in, they keep people out
- And these authorities don’t just politely have a private word with Peter and John—the language Luke uses here implies Violence—they seized Peter and John and threw them in jail until they could deal with them in the morning—they’ve put a stop to this situation—the problem is out of sight, it has been buried
- But 5,000 people believed the gospel they preached even if they didn’t finish their sermon— that must have been quite a crowd
- So they spend the night in jail and then Luke tells us that
- 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?”**
- So **now** we’ve got not only the Sadducees and the Temple authorities, but the entire collection of those with any authority—those of the high-priestly FAMILY—the NAMES—you know even today there are those family names that have power associated with them, and I’m sure you can think of a few—

these are members of the elite by virtue of their place within the social, political and religious SYSTEM we talked about last week

- And their question is not surprising--“**By what power or by what name did you do this?**” –what gives you the authority to think you can make someone unclean clean—to bring someone who’s excluded—whose place is outside the gate—into our temple?
- Peter has an answer for them—verse 8
- Then Peter, **filled with the Holy Spirit**,
- Just in case you’d forgotten what the Book of Acts is all about—it’s about what people do when they’re filled with the Spirit—when they are empowered by the Paraclete
- Peter said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was **sick** and are 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.**
- Now I want to point out two things for you to just hold in your mind for a bit because they’re going to come up again—first—that word for “sick” there—it literally means weak—without strength—the beggar was without strength and he has been made—strong--powerful

- And that word for “Healed”—it literally means “saved”—it’s *soter*, where we get the theological term “soteriology”—which is theology of SALVATION—theology about being SAVED
- So just hold those two points in your mind for a minute
- Now Peter tells them about this Jesus
- **Whom you crucified and God raised from the dead**—every time Peter opens his mouth so far in Acts, we find him saying these words—EVERY TIME--it’s almost as if they’re important or something
- And hold on, though, because here it comes—what else does Peter have to say to these authorities who are so connected to the Temple, that symbol of power and authority, that product of the Roman Empire, built by Herod himself, whose marble stones look like a mountain of snow, whose gilded roofs are blinding to the eye, whose inner chambers hold the pagan spoils of war, whose gates are a barrier to the unclean and the broken—what does Peter now say to them? **We healed this man in the name of Jesus whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead, This same Jesus,**
- **This Jesus is**
- **‘the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’**
- Here Peter refers to Psalm 118—and he is making a direct reference to the Temple—he is saying it may be beautiful, and powerful, and magnificent, but this exclusive structure you built is without foundation—Peter says to the

powers that be: **you have accepted the exquisite marble stones of the Empire, but you rejected the cornerstone**, and

- **There is salvation in no one else**, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.”
- Those words, salvation and saved there—they have the same root word used for healing in the verse before—soter—and what does that imply? That what happened to that beggar is not simply about physical healing—it’s about salvation—salvation that comes through the crucifixion and resurrection of the man Jesus of Nazareth, and the Spirit that raised him and lives in us
- Peter is reminding them that in the incarnation, in the life of Jesus, who made himself nothing, taking on human nature and nothingness, sacrificing himself even to death on a cross, **in him**, something has happened, something that runs counter to these edifices of authority and splendor, something that opens up its gates and says whosoever will may come, here is healing for the broken, hope for the unclean, freedom for the captive, and you can deny it, you can exclude it, but you do so at your own peril—the choice is yours
- Now YOU WOULD THINK, given the reaction of the crowds that we’ve seen so far in the Book of Acts, that the hearts of these folks would have been turned to repentance—that’s what’s happened every other time, but let’s see what happens here—verse 11 and 12
- Now when they saw the **boldness** of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were **amazed and recognised** them as companions of Jesus.

- Here's where it gets good.
- They saw the Boldness of Peter and John
- Now Luke could have chosen any number of words here to mean "boldness" but he uses the word *parrhesia*, and that's a word that does mean boldness, or free speech—literally it means "to say everything"
- It is a word that had been used by ancient Greek writers like Eumenides and Plato for a good 500 years before Luke uses it here, so it was well known
- And *parrhesia* has both a positive/negative meaning—in English we have lots of words that have more than one meaning-- like "press" or "pen"—and when *parrhesia* is used negatively it means something like "chatter"—constant talking—but that's not the way it's used here—it's used in its positive sense
- And *Parrhesia* as it is used here, refers to speech that has four distinct characteristics—the 4 characteristics of *parrhesia* are these
- First one--In *parrhesia*, belief and truth coincide—so if a speaker believes what he's saying, but it isn't true, his speech is not *parrhesia*—if what he says is true, but he doesn't believe it, it's not *parrhesia*—but in *parrhesia*, you have both—it's true and the speaker believes it
- Secondly, *parrhesia*--hides nothing—it is the WHOLE truth—it doesn't only tell what needs to be said, it doesn't use rhetoric or persuasion or circuitous logic—it lays out the plain truth for all to see (now keep this aspect of *parrhesia* in your mind as we see what the elders and rulers suggest in just a bit)

- Thirdly, parrhesia is for the benefit of others—parrhesia is not spoken without purpose, without benefit—**my shirt is black**—it is the whole truth and I believe it, but it is not *parrhesia* because there is no benefit for others—it doesn't do anyone any GOOD for me to speak that particular truth--and parrhesia is not spoken for personal gain—the speaker doesn't stand to gain anything from parrhesia, in fact—and this is the fourth characteristic and perhaps the most important one-- parrhesia
- involves risk for the speaker from the hearer (who is “above” the hearer)—and very often when the word parrhesia is used, that risk is considerable—the one who uses parrhesia often faces the risk of death from the hearer—the authority, the power
- Let me give you an example—in 1965, when civil rights protesters were being arrested, and beaten, and killed, Martin Luther King preached a sermon the day after what was called “Bloody Sunday” in Alabama, and he said:
- A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.
- So we're going to stand up amid horses. We're going to stand up right here in Alabama, amid the billy-clubs. We're going to stand up right here in Alabama amid police dogs We're going to stand up amid tear gas! We're going to stand up amid anything they can muster up, letting the world know that we are determined to be free!
- That, brothers and sisters is parrhesia,

- Did he tell the truth—yes-- did he believe it—yes-- was it for the benefit of others—absolutely-- and did it put him at risk from those who would hear what he proclaimed? Knowing that he was assassinated just 3 years later, I think we would have to say yes
- *Now the one who speaks parrhesia is called the Parrhesiastes*
- So I think a better translation in the scripture here would be “now when they saw the way Peter and John spoke truth to power, the way Peter and John were parrhesiastes (the one who speaks parrhesia)—and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed—why? Because Peter and John were ordinary and uneducated—they were in the eyes of the rulers and elders, without POWER, without AUTHORITY, without INFLUENCE, they were, like the beggar at the gate, without STRENGTH, they were in the eyes of the SYSTEM, WEAK, and yet the POWER of the SPIRIT that raised Jesus from the dead FILLED them and enable them to RISE UP
- There are those who might say that the Christian church is without power and influence these days—who say that the church is dying, is weak, even that it is dead and buried—but I want to remind you this morning that when the Spirit of the living God moves and works and lives in us, the weak find strength, revival comes to the dying, and what was thought to have been dead and buried rises up—and I think we’re seeing that happen—I think we are part of that very movement—and it will be met with **amazement and recognition--**
- Amazement and recognition: we have heard that before

- At Pentecost—people were amazed and recognized their own languages
- When the beggar was healed—people were amazed and recognized him as the one who sat at the gate, and now the rulers and elders are amazed and recognize Peter and John as associates of—followers of Jesus
- You know, when the Spirit works, followers of Jesus do amazing and incredible things—and they get recognized—there’s a whole sermon right there, but we better move on
- Now I want you to recognize what Luke tells us in verse 14-- When they saw the man who had been cured **standing beside them**, they had nothing to say in opposition.
- Wait, where did he come from? Here’s that previously-lame beggar
- Remember he had been CLINGING to Peter and John—and wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you want to stay close to these people who had transformed your life?
- But consider this man’s situation: he had not been saved more than a few hours before he winds up in jail with Peter and John—now what do you think he thought? Well this is great, I was better off sitting on my mat begging for alms—no, he probably thought I was lost but now I’m found, I have entered his courts with praise, I am a living testimony of the healing power of the Spirit of the Living God, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lifted me from my place outside the gate, outside the fellowship of the faithful, outside the presence of God, and found me clean and accepted—I think that’s what he was thinking—but do you know when you follow Jesus it’s

guaranteed that you are going to find yourself doing things you never imagined possible, finding strength you never had before to stand up in places you never expected you'd be

- So these authorities ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.
- Now you see how this is the OPPOSITE of parrhesia, the way Peter and John speak, HIDING NOTHING?
- In politics, you sometimes hear about efforts to BURY a story—to spin it in a certain way—to hide as much of it as you can in order to control it—and that's what the elders and rulers recommend—people know about the healing, but let's at least control the "in the name of Jesus" part—let's bury it—yes, that will work---but when the Holy Spirit is at work, burial is not enough, what these rulers thought was dead and buried has been resurrected, and we are seeing here the body of Christ, the church, filled with the Spirit and rising up, building the Kingdom, proclaiming the good news to all flesh—and how do Peter and John answer the authorities?
- Verse 19 and 20 tell us

- But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right **in God’s sight to listen to** you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”
- Whether it is right **IN God’s sight**—there’s been lots of looking and watching here—we mentioned that last week
- When Peter and John go up to the temple the beggar sees them and asks for alms
- Peter and John look at him
- Peter says LOOK at ME
- The beggar looks with expectation
- He is healed and all the people SEE him and recognize him
- Peter SEES the people gather and he addresses them
- Oh, but the authorities are watching, too, and so they place Peter and John and the beggar in jail—literally UNDER WATCH—so they can keep an eye on them
- And here they are examining them, taking a look at their motives and actions
- But Peter and John are reminding the rulers and elders, and reminding us, that amidst all this looking and watching, everything that happens is under the watchful eye of God almighty—and He will be the ultimate judge, and so they say
- We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard—why? Because we are parrhesiastes—the Spirit fills us with boldness, with PARRHESIA, with the ability and the willingness to speak truth to power, the

whole truth, hiding nothing, for the benefit of others, even though it places us at risk—and here is that risk in verse 21

- After **threatening** them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened.
- Threatening—and these are not idle threats, these were the authorities who had crucified Jesus—**but what power does the threat of death hold for those who see themselves as having been crucified with Christ, who have the hope of the resurrection?**
- And now the passage ends with an odd sentence—
- For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than **forty** years old.
- Why “more than forty”? Why not 48, or 63, or 54?
- Forty—that’s the number of testing—like Jesus in the wilderness in Luke’s gospel—when the Devil says to Jesus, “let’s make a deal”—and that’s what the authorities are offering here—they’re saying you guys shut up and we won’t kill you
- Luke is telling us that this is, like Jesus’ time in the wilderness, like the 40 days before the ascension, this is Peter and John’s time of testing, of proving, and we read in the verses that follow that Peter and John go back to the church and tell them all about what has happened, and they all pray together and give thanks to God, and **guess what they ask for**—they ask God to look at the threats from those in authority and to give them the **power** to speak

with **parrhesia**—and as they pray, the place where they are shaken, they are all filled with the Holy Spirit and “they spoke the word of God with—no surprise here—with Parrhesia”—they are all parrhesiastes—called to speak truth to power with boldness

- Like the beggar at the gate, like Jesus on the cross, Peter and John and the church in its earliest days are without strength, they are, in the eyes of the System, weak-- but what happens through the power of the Spirit, the Power of the name of Jesus? That power saves, heals, resurrects, causes to rise up—confronted by the powers that be, Peter and John are led by the power of the Spirit to speak truth to power. And this same power that came upon the church then is available to the church in 2022—the power to speak the Word of God with parrhesia—speaking the truth, believing the truth, for the sake of others, in spite of the risks.
- I believe we are seeing something happen in the church today, a movement of the Spirit, a movement of the Kingdom. I believe the Body of Christ is being filled with the Spirit in a fresh and a new way. As we move out of these 2 years of COVID restriction and uncertainty, you can feel the anticipation and sense of expectancy in the air—and I pray that we may all be parrhesiastes—that the places we gather together will be shaken and filled with the Spirit, as we proclaim the good news of the cornerstone that the builders rejected, but is our foundation—as we speak truth to power