

The Strong Name Builds a Strong Church

Message for Sunday, March 22, 2015
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Acts 4:5-13, and others

Children's Message: from Matthew 4:18-22 "Follow me."

From *More Christian Parables from Science*: A wind vane placed in front of a fan always points in the direction of the wind. When the wind changes direction, so does the wind vane. We, however, need a steady direction in life. We need to follow Jesus Christ; he shows us the way. In fact, he said, "I am the way."

Message "The Strong Name Builds a Strong Church"

1) Superhuman power or supernatural power?

When I was thirteen years old, I had chosen my life's work: I was going to be a doctor. I was going to use the marvels of modern medicine to help people. I was excited just thinking about it. Somehow, though, after I had been accepted into medical school, I felt that God was pulling me towards full-time ministry in the church. Reluctantly, I switched my classes in this new direction.

I eventually graduated from theological school with a paper that said I had earned a degree, that I was qualified to be a pastor. My head was filled with knowledge, and I was ready to take on the world.

Some years after that, I was looking for a church to which I could move. The search committee here was obviously getting a bit desperate, so they agreed to take me on. And so, on July 1, 2013, I began work as the pastor of St. Paul's United Church.

Think back with me to that day. Consider my job description:

- to preach and teach God's Word in such a way that individuals have their lives transformed and literally become new people
- to provide pastoral care for people, letting them know God cares about them
- to lead and provide spiritual direction for the church
- to equip people to use their spiritual gifts so that they can impact others for God.

Now, how was I going to accomplish these tasks? Was my theological education enough to see lives transformed? Were my powers of eloquence and my dynamic and charismatic personality going to impact people powerfully? You can stop laughing now.

The truth is, I'm more like the preacher who stood at the door shaking people's hands while they were leaving after the service. An elderly man shook his hand and said, "Reverend, that was the worst sermon I've ever listened to. It was terrible."

As the preacher stood there dumbfounded, the old man's wife stepped in, trying to help. She hadn't heard the conversation, but realized her husband had said something out of place. "Please don't pay any attention to him, pastor. He only repeats what he hears everyone else saying."

You see, essentially I was and am powerless to accomplish my work. I can't lead sinners to repent. I don't have the ability to bring conviction to people. My speaking gifts are not sufficient to transform lives.

Now, this problem isn't just confined to me. Let's talk about you. God has given us all a mission. It's not just pastors and other Christian workers who run up against these barriers. God has given us all the task of spreading the Gospel, of using our gifts, of loving others with the love of Jesus Christ.

Who among us has the ability to do this? The answer: no one. That's why I say that the Christian life is not hard—it's impossible. There's no way that you and I can accomplish on our own what God wants us to do.

Here's an example from the Bible. Those who were here last week will remember this. This comes during the time after Jesus rose from the dead and returned to heaven. His followers were taking the good news of new life through Jesus all over the country. One day Peter and John went to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and a beggar who had been crippled from the time he was born asked for money. Here's what happened.

Acts 3:6-8, New International Version:

Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

Taking him by the right hand, Peter helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

There were thousands of people there, and you can imagine this caused quite a commotion. Some people thought that Peter was a 1st century superhero with superhuman powers. Here's what Peter said to them:

Acts 3:12, New Living Translation:

“People of Israel,” he said, “what is so surprising about this? And why stare at us as though we had made this man walk by our own power or godliness?”

They said, in effect, “It’s not us; it’s Jesus who did this.”

The next morning Peter and John were brought before the Jewish high council. You might think they were going to receive an award for their good deed. Not at all! They were put on trial, charged with blasphemy, because the officials did not believe in Jesus. So Peter repeated his statement:

Acts 4:10–13, New Living Translation:

“Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ from Nazareth, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says,

‘The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.’

There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.”

The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus.

The name of Jesus. The power of Jesus. That’s the solid foundation of the church. That’s why I say “The strong name builds a strong church.” Any other name (like mine, or yours), any other power (again, like mine or yours), is just building on sand.

2) Just in case you missed that... we need God’s power

This is not new, by the way. Back in the Old Testament, the part of the Bible before Jesus, there was a period when the people faced an impossible task, made even worse by opposition and threats from their enemies. The leader of Israel at the time was Zerubbabel. God sent the prophet Zechariah with a message for Zerubbabel.

Zechariah 4:6, Today’s English Version:

The angel told me to give Zerubbabel this message from the Lord: “You will succeed, not by military might or by your own strength, but by my spirit.”

The disciples were weak in their own power. When the going got tough with Jesus, they ran away. Then they received power from the Holy Spirit. No more hiding

after that! They spoke openly about Jesus and thousands were so moved that they also became followers of Jesus.

The Jewish authorities were amazed when they saw the boldness and courage of Peter and John. Nothing could stop them. Even after they were beaten and ordered to stop speaking about Jesus and threatened with even worse, they went out and spoke to even more people.

Where did they get this power? From the Holy Spirit. The Spirit empowered the early Christians to work miracles as they proclaimed the Gospel. He gave power to the disciples so they proclaimed the Word boldly and with great power.

Now listen to me.

We too have been given the task of helping to build God’s kingdom. I remind you that this task is humanly impossible. But as the Holy Spirit empowers us, we will receive more than adequate power to accomplish this task.

3) Put the power to work

I don’t know what abilities you have. But I know that if you are a believer, you have received a spiritual gift. Speaking of spiritual gifts, the apostle Paul writes:

1 Corinthians 12:4-6, Today’s English Version:

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service.

When we use our gifts, even if we consider them to be small, we are accepting the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. God promises us his Spirit to give us the ability and the power to accomplish the task he has given us.

The key here is to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, rather than doing it by ourselves. There was a barber who was a follower of Jesus who hadn’t learned this yet. He had the idea that he should tell others about his faith, and invite them to follow Jesus. But he didn’t know what to do or say. Rather than praying for guidance, or asking for help from others, he just stewed about it. Finally he declared to himself: “Today is the day. I *will* tell someone about Jesus today.”

But every time a customer came into his shop, he lost his nerve. It was almost closing time, and his last customer of the day came in for a shave. With his razor, he started cutting the hair off the man’s cheeks. But his mind was

in a turmoil: “I’ve got to say something to him, but what?” He shaved above the lip, and then the chin. Still no idea. He was holding the razor against the man’s throat when he looked the man in the face and shouted at him, “Are you ready to die?!”

I can’t transform lives. I can’t convict people of sin. I can’t be an effective pastor on my own strength. We aren’t very powerful. We don’t have the abilities and the boldness necessary to turn the world upside down with the truth of the Gospel. But that’s all right. Because God says, “It’s not by your might, it’s not by your power, it’s by my Spirit.”

What God needs most of all are people who are willing to serve. Ability is nice; but availability is even more important. Allow God to work in your life, to guide you and help you, and you will see wonderful blessings in the lives of people you touch.

I was part of a choir when I was at theological school. At the start of the year, when the choir director was recruiting new members for the choir, he gave this invitation: “You supply the body. I’ll supply the voice.” In other words, just come and be willing to follow my instructions, and I will make you a good singer.

That’s what God says to us: “You supply the body. I’ll supply the Holy Spirit and the power. Just come to me and be willing to obey, and I will help you to do wonderful things.”

Next steps:

- Confess any pride in your abilities. God can’t use people who are full of themselves.
- Offer those abilities for God’s service. After all, it was God who gave them to you.
- Pray for opportunities to serve. Then do it!