

Believers Pray for Boldness

Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Acts 4:13-31 NSRV

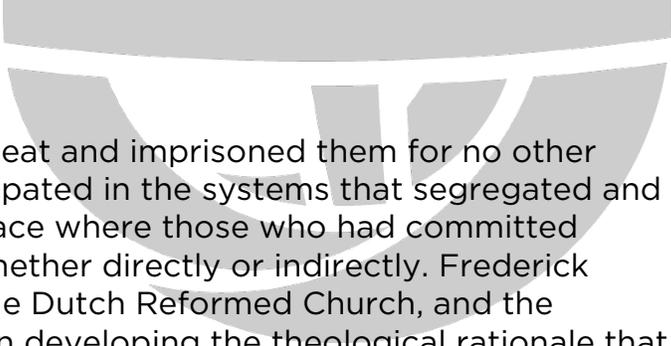
¹³Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. ¹⁴When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. ¹⁵So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. ¹⁶They 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. ¹⁷But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name." ¹⁸So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." ²¹After 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. ²²For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

²³After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴When 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, ²⁵it 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? ²⁶The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

²⁷For 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, ²⁸to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹When 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.

Frederick Marais was a young seminary student at Stellenbosch University near Cape Town South Africa. It was 1996. Apartheid had recently ended. If you recall, Apartheid was the official policy of the South African government for forty-some years. It systematically and ruthlessly discriminated against the black majority of the population in favor of the ruling white minority.

As part of the way forward for the country, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established. This commission brought the oppressed and their oppressors together to confront the consequences of apartheid and create space for reconciliation. The chair of the Commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu believed there was no future for South Africa without forgiveness. Those who had been harmed were given the chance to speak directly



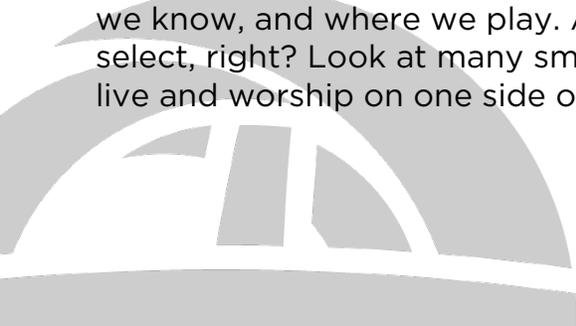
to the people who killed their loved ones, who beat and imprisoned them for no other reason than the color of their skin or who participated in the systems that segregated and oppressed. These commissions were also the place where those who had committed these atrocities confessed their participation, whether directly or indirectly. Frederick Marais was white. The church he belonged to, the Dutch Reformed Church, and the University he studied at had been instrumental in developing the theological rationale that justified apartheid. The church and the government cooperated in this inhumane system.

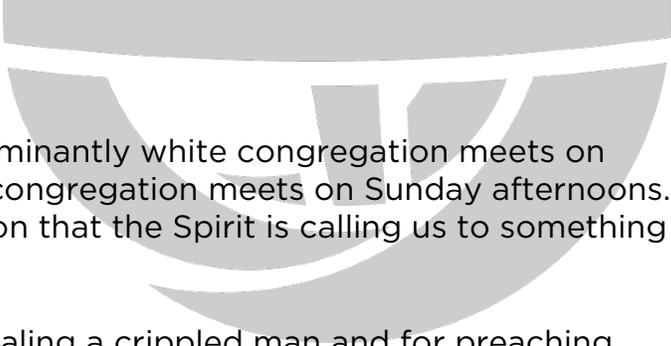
Frederick had no standing in the church at the time. He was not a pastor or a theologian, but a student. Yet he was convinced that what his church had done was wrong. But speaking out and calling the church to action could have cost him his future. They could have refused to allow him to be a pastor. They could have kicked him out of school all together. He easily could have been silenced. Yet, his conviction of faith in Christ and his commitment to the Gospel compelled him to confront the truth of his church's actions. It was as if he were Peter or John standing before the Council saying, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than God, you must judge, for I cannot keep from speaking about what I have seen and heard." The Spirit seemed to be stirring in Frederick and casting a new vision for what the world should look like. And he couldn't help but need to be part of the Spirit's work.

He went to his professors and local church leaders in the Dutch Reformed Church and appealed to them to participate in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He was convinced that they needed to confess. At the time, no church in all of South Africa had yet to come forward to confess the role they played in perpetuating this system that oppressed and harmed people created in God's image.

Finally, a group of about 10 church leaders in Stellenbosch, and a handful of faculty at the University agreed. During a hearing, in front of the Commission's chair Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others, Frederick stood with his professors and leaders of local churches. His professor said, "We confess that we kept silent at times when we should have spoken out clearly. We confess that, although we did at times try to protest against the unjust treatment of people, we often did so only with great timidity and circumspection." Toward the end of the hearing, Frederick addressed Archbishop Tutu and said, "Mr Chairman, this submission made us realize right at the beginning that it cannot be the end. It is but the beginning, it is the first little step that we are taking out of the isolation of division."

If there is a core message of Scripture - it is that God and God's Spirit are constantly moving us out of the isolation of division and toward reconciliation with God and one another. The thing is that we sometimes like those divisions. Right? For many of us they keep life and the messiness of people at arms-length. It is why for good and for ill cities are zoned in such a way that typically keep rich people in one part of town and poor people in another part of town. This affects where we shop, where we go to school, who we know, and where we play. And it's not just government policies, but we often self-select, right? Look at many small towns across Minnesota and you'll find that the Catholics live and worship on one side of town and the Lutherans live and worship on the other side



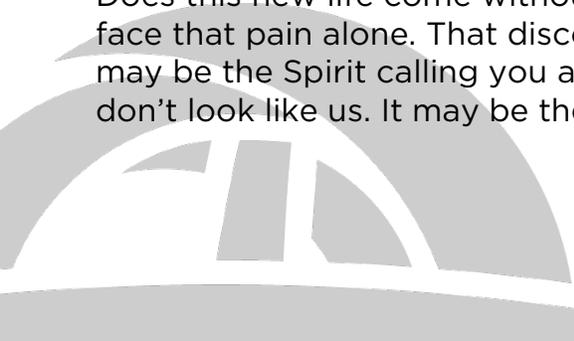


of town. We see this here at Zumbro as a predominantly white congregation meets on Sunday mornings, while a predominantly black congregation meets on Sunday afternoons. It takes hard work, intentionality, and a conviction that the Spirit is calling us to something different in order to break down these divisions.

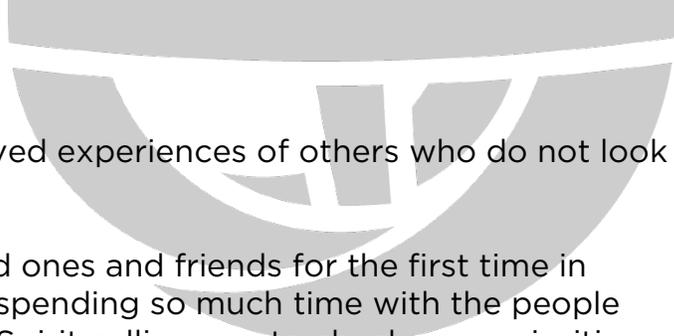
The Council that detained Peter and John for healing a crippled man and for preaching resurrection from the dead didn't like the way they were messing with their neat systems. What they were doing didn't fit their boxes of division, and didn't agree with their systems of power. All kinds of different people were joining this Jesus movement. The Spirit was doing powerful acts of healing that nothing else but their relationship with Jesus could explain. The Council was perplexed. They had sought to silence Jesus by crucifying him, but now they were confronted with the fact that their efforts had backfired. No longer was it one teacher with twelve fledgling disciples, but weeks or months later there were 5,000 who were bold to believe that there was true life in Jesus' name. This movement was disrupting the divisions that kept some people comfortable and others isolated. This Holy Spirit led Jesus movement created a new community that was living by a new set of principles. Rather than division there was love. Rather than power there was service. Rather than status there was fellowship. Rather than competition there was cooperation. These principles were true - truer and more lifegiving than anything the people had experienced previously. Jesus was not the end. He was just the beginning. And the Spirit was showing the way.

The truth remains that this Spirit-led way of life is still as powerful today. But perhaps it's more difficult to see. Then again, through the last fifteen months of pandemic and confronting the reality that our society still has a way to go in achieving a "more perfect union", it feels like a lot of the principles we once lived by have been challenged, that what we thought was true was not as true or lifegiving as it once seemed. Many of us are wrestling in new ways, productive ways, with the discomfort of white privilege and are asking new questions in order to move forward with our black and brown neighbors. We have seen how our health care system is ill-equipped and unable to care for everyone. How our economic scales are heavily tipped in the wealthy's favor. We have witnessed people who profess faith in Jesus, yet have reacted to the pressures we're all experiencing in ways that don't affirm the lives of others, or reflect the love of God, and or that they cling to power and status as an idol. And because of the stress and strain of the last many months, sometimes we have had to confess that those people have been us.

Yet what we can trust is that this is not the end. We are standing on the precipice of a new beginning. God's Spirit is still stirring in us and in the world. God never wastes a crisis. God reveals God's heart in the messiest of times, in the seemingly dead-end spaces of life. And then God brings resurrection - new life, restored life, reconciled life to us and to all creation.



Does this new life come without pain? No. But you can be sure that in Christ we never face that pain alone. That discomfort you have felt about race and police brutality - that may be the Spirit calling you and calling us to examine our relationships with people who don't look like us. It may be the Spirit nudging us to examine our relationship with power



more closely and to listen more deeply to the lived experiences of others who do not look like us.

The relief you are feeling after seeing your loved ones and friends for the first time in many months? Or the benefits you notice from spending so much time with the people you live with since pandemic? That may be the Spirit calling you to check your priorities, assess your relationships and actually do something different so that you don't return to the same unending race for success you were on before.

Or maybe, like Frederick, you have seen and heard something over the last year that you can no longer remain silent about, yet at the same time recognize the consequences it may bring. Whatever is stirring in you these days, whatever beginning you sense is here, know that the Spirit of the living God is already out ahead of you. Trust that the Spirit is stirring in you to give you all the boldness you need to take the next step toward love, toward healing, toward reconciliation, and community in Jesus' name. This is the reality that God is continually creating in Jesus. And pray for boldness. I will pray with you and for you and for all of us as we all continue to wrestle with what this new beginning we are standing at means. May God grant you the boldness to pray like Peter and John that the same Holy Spirit that moved through them will also move through you, through us, to make God's Spirit-led vision of love, reconciliation, and community more visible in the world. Amen.

