

## **“Too Shy to be Bold”**

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Based upon Psalm 138; Acts 4:23-31

We had a tradition on the Sunday closest to Epiphany, that celebration of the wise men following the star to visit the Christ Child. We had a basket of glittering stars and everyone at church that morning got to choose a star. On the back of the star there was a word, and this became that person's word for the year. We called it Star Words. Now, you couldn't put your star back in the basket and choose another if it happened that you didn't like your word. Your word was your word for that year. For some, it stopped at that. They may have thought very little about their Star Word after that Sunday. But for others, it became significant.

Some would study the Bible to see where or if their word was used in the scriptures, some searched the word's origin, looked through poetry, literature and music to see find various ways their word appeared. Some would seriously reflect on the meaning of that word in their lives: “Friendship,” “Honesty,” “Courage,” “Patience” whatever their word was for that year.

One year a woman walked into my office after worship quite unhappy with her word. She said, “I don't like my word!” My word is “BOLD,” and I am too shy to be bold.” I understood her reaction. I often think that I am too shy to be bold.

There have occasions when I have sat around in meetings and listened while someone presented the exact idea that I had brought up ten minutes before. Everyone jumped on it, but when I suggested it, I felt invisible and blamed myself for not being articulate enough. I have been told, “Now, don't be annoying when you tell that person.” “Am I annoying?” I thought. “You know you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” “So, you're telling me to be sweet and charming.” Well, maybe the situation calls for that, but maybe it doesn't.

I understood what my church member was saying and why she didn't like her word. Sometimes It's easier to keep your mouth shut. You get into less trouble, and you don't get so much advice. But my response to this woman was the response I knew I needed as well. “Maybe BOLD is exactly the word you need this year. Let me know how it goes.”

Nicola Sturgeon is the Minister of Scotland, the leader of the Scottish National Party. She is in her fifties and citizens are endeared to her and call her “Our Nicola.” It wasn't always that way. She went into politics at a very young age. There were no other women. She was surrounded by male counterparts who were popular leaders; their boldness and assertiveness were considered strengths.

So, she emulated them and became bold, strong, and assertive in her interactions and her colleagues and the community started referring to her as a “nippy sweetie.” You heard that correctly, a “nippy sweetie.” In Glasgow, it's slang for a woman who is viewed as bossy and strident. Nicola says it was tempting to step back and get out of the way and just be charming. But she decided to live into it her “nippy sweetness” because she knew she was where she

needed to be. She would be bold whatever the sentiments towards her as a woman because she needed to be the voice for those who had no voice.

So, depending on the position from where we stand, being bold can be challenging or not. And as far as our faith, scriptures tell us on many occasions to **speak the faith boldly**.

So, what do you think that means we should do and how do you define boldness? According to Webster, boldness has to do with being daring and fearless before danger. The Greek word (parrasias) is a little more nuanced meaning confidence about expressing oneself freely, openly and fearlessly.

Jesus knew that speaking boldly would get his followers into many conundrums, and his advice was: “When they bring you before the powers that be, the Holy Spirit will tell you what to say.” In other words, don’t be too preoccupied with how you are coming across. Rely on the Spirit.

In our text this morning from the Acts we are told that Peter and John are arriving back at the home of their friend’s after being released from prison. They were in prison because they had healed a crippled beggar in the name of Jesus. The people saw this with amazement and ran to Peter and John who preached Jesus’ place in Israel’s history. The people saw signs and wonders and especially those on the lower rungs of this society felt that they were finally being seen and heard and not pushed aside. I wonder how many had walked past this crippled beggar and for how many years? Who cared about where he would eat, what he would eat and where he would sleep?

There was no organized institution for these early followers, No Book of Order or Book of Confessions. There were just new believers, a small group wanting to locate themselves in space and time as participants in a real historical movement: Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected for the salvation of all.

While Peter and John were speaking, the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came to them annoyed at what they were teaching and doing in the name of Jesus. Peter and John were arrested. The next day, Peter and John appeared before the powers that be; the rulers, the elders, the scribes, everyone in the high priestly family. The healed beggar came and stood with them as Peter and John spoke boldly, presenting a counterculture which gave lots of attention to the poor and the distribution of goods needed by these people and the sharing of possessions.

This was proving to be an annoyance and a difficulty for the rich and the powerful.

It’s been said that whoever controls the words influences what goes on in the town’s square or marketplace. For the powers that be, Peter and John and these early followers of Jesus were having too much influence in the marketplace. Worried that the marketplace had already been stirred up and that the people would react strongly to any punishment Peter and John would

incur, the leaders released them saying, “Don’t you dare speak the name of Jesus any more or do anything in his name.”

Once again, Peter and John spoke boldly. Peter and John were not the powers that be!

**Speaking boldly from a position of power is very different than speaking boldly when holding no power. Speaking boldly from a position of power is very different than speaking boldly when holding no power.**

Which brings us to today and the meaning, we can glean for our own walk of faith and the instruction to speak the faith boldly. Things are different now than the days of Peter and John and for Christians at the end of the first century when Acts was written.

In 2021, Christianity is the largest religious group in the world. In our country, we can easily find other Christians, and when you study church history, you learn that once Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the third century, the Christian faith became global and often became conflated with national pride and interests. Wars were fought in the name of Christendom, land was taken and claimed in the name of God, children were separated from families as Bible verses were misinterpreted to promote economic causes that benefitted the privileged and some even thought that they were God’s favored children. With all these perceptions and majority in numbers comes power.

Peter and John and the early Christians were NOT the powers that be. They were a small group, and as we learned last week devoting themselves to teaching, worship, sharing food and sharing possessions, led by the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, Christians today take these biblical texts about boldness and run with them as permission to be zealous and ardent and pound that pulpit or lectern speaking boldly, often getting the message of faith in Jesus Christ confused with their own viewpoints and strong feelings

So, what do the Scriptures teach us in 2021 about speaking the faith boldly?

Perhaps to speak the faith boldly, we first need to **LISTEN BOLDLY, openly, fearlessly.** Listen to those who are not the powers that be. Listen to the messages that are hard to hear when we what we want to say is, “Why can’t just move on. Leave the past in the past. Just get along.”

**LISTEN BOLDLY** and maybe we will understand why we just can’t move on and push the past and issues generated from the past aside. **LISTEN BOLDLY** to those who voices have been ignored. **LISTEN BOLDLY** to those cannot speak, who have no voice, maybe because of language, maybe because of a physical or cognitive challenge. Figure out how to **LISTEN BOLDLY** to them.

There is a woman, now in her early twenties, Elizabeth M. Bonker, who was diagnosed with autism and has never been able to speak. When she was nine and so many efforts had been made to get her to talk, the therapist turned to Elizabeth's mother, behaving as if Elizabeth was not in the room and said to the mother, "Maybe Elizabeth just doesn't want to talk." At nine years of age, Elizabeth wrote this poem in response to that therapist's comment.

I sometimes fear,  
That people cannot understand that I hear,  
And I know,  
That they don't believe I go to every extreme to express my need to talk.  
If only they could walk in my shoes, they would share my news.  
I am in here and trying to speak every day in some kind of way.

To speak the faith boldly, we must **LISTEN BOLDLY** to those whose voices for many reasons have been drowned because we serve a God whose salvation is for all. To speak the faith boldly, we must also **CONFESS BOLDLY, openly and fearlessly.**

Boldness, as described in the scriptures, depends on truth. We are having a challenge with truth today. Someone has called it truth decay, the diminished role that facts play in public life. There was a report on divisions taking place among families over conspiracy theories and who won the election and climate change. One woman was quoted, "it's so sad for me. Different viewpoints were always respected, but now, we don't even share the same reality. I used to be able to talk to my family."

Boldness depends on truth!

You have heard through the years about Truth and Reconciliation Efforts which have taken place in countries whose histories are burdened with war crimes and human right abuses. Truth and reconciliation promote the belief that confronting and reckoning with the past is necessary for successful transitions from conflict and tension to peace and connectedness.

Let me be very clear that we can love our country dearly. On National holidays, there is a flag flying at my house. But in no way does this mean that we don't have to confess those times in history when we have gotten it wrong. Speaking our faith boldly directs us to face truths. Liberty, justice, equality for all are not accolades to return to, but aspirations to move towards and to make happen, knowing that God will redeem the past and show us the way to do better.

Frederich Buechner wrote, "To come before God in confession is not to tell anything God doesn't already know. Until we confess, however, our sins, our shortcoming, our ignoring truths, our sweeping things aside hoping they will go away; all of these actually become a deep abyss between us and God. They keep us distant from God. But when we **CONFESS BOLDLY**, our sins, our shortcoming, what we didn't get right, there's a Golden Gate Bridge right into God's mercy and redemption. There is hope for setting things right.

**SO, Don't be shy! Listen boldly! Confess boldly!**

**THEN, SPEAK BOLDLY those truths which align themselves with the values of God's heart- justice, righteousness, compassion, peace, truth and salvation for all.**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!

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