



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Praying for Boldness*

Acts 4.29–31

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## **BVS LUNCHEON**

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This summer I have been invited to speak at one of the major luncheons at Annual Conference. It is hosted by Brethren Volunteer Service and believe it or not, BVS gave me complete discretion to speak on a topic of my choosing. Bear in mind that I love the Church of the Brethren; I grew up in it, served as a volunteer in the church for two years, attended the Church of the Brethren Seminary, was national and international staff, and had the privilege of serving congregations in Arizona, Ohio and now Pennsylvania before coming here to Etown. The Church of the Brethren has been very important to me. So let me read to you what I chose and appears in the conference booklet:

*You love the Church of the Brethren? So what?!*" Our future as the Church of the Brethren looks bleak: membership is plummeting, once prophetic programs are anemic shadows of their former selves, pastoral and denominational leaders are demoralized and paralyzed by conflict. Two persistent habits are cementing our position as a dying denomination: 1) When in conflict we choose the path of least resistance (often under the false banners of harmony and unity), and 2) Averse to risk, we consistently reject new ideas and innovations. Examining stories of failure and success, Greg will propose a course for returning to our radical roots of bold Spirit-driven leadership and love. The time for playing small is over!

Let me say a couple of things: 1—I want to be clear that this congregation has not fallen prey to those two bad habits. We have walked up to conflict in healthy ways, and we have been willing to take risk and try new things for the sake of ministry and are seeing the vitality that brings to ministry.

2 Some people have suggested to me that I'm being a bit bold. I love the Church of the Brethren. I have given my adult working life to serving the church, and it has been good to me too. But I see the denomination slipping away. What I really want to ask is As followers of Jesus, when did we stop being bold?

#### **LONG STORY SHORT...SYNOPSIS OF PENTECOST ACTS 4**

Today is Pentecost, the day when Christianity celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first Christian community—it is described as an unworldly, amazing event with wind rushing in, people from all around the world were able to speak and understand different languages. It was a confirmation for the church that Jesus' message was for everyone and that God was still alive and with them.

And after this, they prayed and organized and got to work. The community had to figure out a way to organize themselves and fund this new endeavor, and people gave cash and sold properties they owned and they cared for one another (as Richard reminded us last week). They were healing people and bringing people to Jesus' way. It was a beautiful community of faith that was making a difference in the world. And all of this made them strong and free.

But it was also tough. As you can imagine, their actions also irritated the authorities around them because they were disrupting the status quo (which is always more threatening to the powers-that-be than any idea). So it wasn't long before Peter and John, the leaders of this first Jesus church were arrested, held in jail overnight and then brought before the Church Council, (Carroll and Nancy, I know you've been working hard on the council agenda, but trust that nothing like this has happened prior to our Church Council this afternoon?)

The next day when Peter and John were hauled in front of the council, scripture says that they spoke with **such boldness** that those gathered were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. The council, not having anything to charge them with, let them go, but with a warning: “If you keep this up you won’t get off so easily next time.”

Now, we can only imagine how daunting it must have been to face the religious establishment— who also had civil authority to jail you—to get thrown in jail overnight and threatened. Remember, this is the same religious leadership who had just colluded with the Romans to execute Jesus.

But they had a message that they could not keep inside, and so they prayed. Pay attention here to what they prayed for and what happened.

*And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all **boldness**, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.’ When 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**.*

They prayed for boldness. The valuable resource that they asked God for was boldness. This is so fascinating to me. They didn’t pray for Jesus to come back and save the day. They didn’t pray for God to change the ruling powers, or for the Council to have a change of heart, or for the money so they could move somewhere else. They prayed to God for themselves, so that they could keep being conduits for God.

Do we have the need for a prayer like that?

**4** **Boldness** (*parresia, par-rhay-SEE-ah*) used a bunch of times in Acts. Usually translated at “boldness”, also as “openly,” confidently, or “leaving a listener with something that deserves to be remembered.” Paul spoke with this boldness after the scales fell from his eyes. The word is in the final sentence of the book, Paul while under house arrest, proclaiming the reign of God and teaching about Jesus with **boldness**. Boldness was a key ingredient to being the church in those first days.

**BOLDNESS IS HOW THE FIRST CHRISTIANS WERE IDENTIFIED!**

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4:13 *Now when they (the leaders annoyed with them) 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.*

Imagine if we could be identified in the same way. “I know that woman follows Jesus because I’ve seen her boldness in the way she lives.” Or, “Have you seen how much that guy cares. He must be a Christian.” And notice that we don’t have to have a stunning intellect or be an extraordinary person to be bold for Jesus.

*This* is why I can be bold at the BVS luncheon. Because the Church of the Brethren was started when 8 young adults took bold action, baptized one another in the way of the gospel, risking imprisonment or worse.

I can be bold because Dan West—the founder of Heifer Project International—had the boldness/the audacity to suggest a new way of doing relief aid for the hungry of our world—you know the idea that everyone deserves to eat and we can serve the world by starting a chain of giving that is charitable, Biblical, sustainable and enables human dignity. He was told that was a dumb idea that would never work.

We can be bold because this congregation is no stranger to boldness. It was bold to move to this property and build this building with a barely 2/3 Council majority. It was bold to host Russian Orthodox ministers in the height of the Cold War. We have been bold to speak peace time and again in a nation that too readily glorifies war. We are bold to welcome all in an increasingly tribal society. And, even though it sounds incongruous, we are bold when we serve humbly in a world where we are taught to scream "Look at me! Look at me!"

Friends, it is once again time for us to pray for boldness. We know our world is changing around us. We know that there are those who would like to see us fail. We know that Spirit is still with us. We know that the Jesus' message still means something.

### **A PRAYER FOR BOLDNESS**

God, It is hard to be bold. We confess that we worry about what others will think of us: will they see us as proud or arrogant, or even worse, foolish and naïve?

We confess that we are sometimes lazy and prefer the path of least resistance, the comfortable armchair of inaction.

We worry that boldness will lead to conflict, or even punishment and suffering.

Like the first Christians, we pray for boldness. We pray for boldness so that we can be channels of your work in the world. We want to be identified by our boldness.

When we are unsure of ourselves and worried about what others will think, help us prop one another up.

When we are afraid of conflict and punishment and suffering, give us courage to walk up to it in love and stay true to ourselves and even truer to you.

6 When we are lazy, send your Spirit to inspire us to get up and go out with passion.

God we know that you are counting on us, and that we can always count on you.

Shake this place. Fill us with your Spirit. Amen









