

Acts 4:33:

“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

PRAY.

I want to begin this morning with a question. Now – just to be clear – this question is directed to those of you in the room this morning who have spent a decent amount of time in church.

Not necessarily this church – First Presbyterian Church of Edmond – But just church in general...

Maybe you grew up in the church and have spent pretty much your whole life attending church – or you have been a part of church as an adult for a decent chunk of time...

If that's you: then I want you to think about this question for a moment.

BUT – if you are new to church this morning. Or if being a part of a church is something that you are still trying to figure out – then you likely won't have an answer to this question and that's totally okay - hang with me anyway – because I believe that where we are going to go is still for you this morning.

But - for those of you who have been a part of a church for at least a decent amount of time...

My question to you this morning is this: When was the last time you felt the ***“power of the church”?***

Now I want to make sure I make this abundantly clear to you about what I'm wanting you to think about. I'm not asking you – when was the last time you experienced a powerful moment in worship that really moved you and stirred something in you and caused you to act or do something. I'm not asking you – when was the last time you saw all the members of the church present on Sunday morning at once. I'm not asking you- when was the last time you saw the church packed with people from the community. I'm not asking you – when was the last really great sermon you heard that caused you to leave the building that morning and take a big bold step of faith. I'm not even asking you – when was the last time you saw the church do something really cool!

I'm specifically asking you – when was the last time you felt the ***“power of the church”?***

Now – if you are struggling with that answer – that's alright.

It may just mean you have no idea what I'm asking you... which is fine. I'm pretty accustomed to my team looking at me with a look like – Brett we really aren't sure what exactly you are saying right now.

If you are struggling with an answer...

It may mean that it's just been a while - and you aren't sure exactly when you last really felt the power of the church.

If you are struggling with an answer...

It may mean that you think the church has lots of its power...

But if you are just like – man...

I really don't know. I really don't know what you mean when you say “power of the church”...

Then I really hope you will stay with me this morning – because I think it's possible that this power that I am talking about.

The power of the church.

Is ready to just explode... It's ready to just absolutely take off like wildfire – And it's not nearly as difficult to tap into as you might think it is. Let me try and explain to you what I mean.

Twice a month our entire staff here at First Pres gets together for an “all-staff” meeting – and we usually begin those times together with a different member of our staff leading the rest of the staff in a devotional. Now – I love this time together as a staff – and it is awesome to hear different devotional thoughts from different members of our staff here at First Pres.

But about two or three months ago – a member of our staff shared about her dad and his testimony and how his testimony had impacted her. And this was a wonderful devotional – and I greatly enjoyed it...

But about a week after this staff member shared this devotional another one of our staff members came and found me one day and said to me –

“hey I was really moved by that devotional that was shared last week and the testimony of that person's dad – and I think that I might like to share a devotional at staff meeting sometime”

“but I don't really know what I would say – or how I would go about it – would you mind meeting with me and talking it through” ...?

And what happened next – over the course of the last couple of months – I believe – is the very essence of where the power of the church is found.

Now – some of you here this morning will recognize this person and know the contributions that this person makes to our church...

But others of you will not...

But if we could put that picture up on the screens... And I do want to mention – I have his permission to do this this morning. He has no idea what exactly I'm going to say or why – but I did sort of ask him if this would be okay....

For those of you that don't know – this is Larry Shields. And Larry is a member of our staff here at First Pres – and he is on our custodial and facilities team here. And Larry is a really great guy.

It has been a real privilege to get to know Larry over the last several years – and I greatly enjoy interacting with him over the course of the day as he's making his way around our building making sure it's ready for any upcoming activities.

But Larry came to me after hearing the devotional that was shared in staff meeting that I mentioned and he said – “I think I might want to give a devotional – would you mind meeting with me.”

And I said – absolutely. I would love to sit down and hear what's on your mind. And so –almost three months ago Larry and I began meeting every couple of weeks.

And I will never forget that first time we sat down and began talking about the possibility of him giving a devotional at staff meeting. I remember – he said to me – “I really think I might like to give a devotional – but I really don't know what it would be about or even why I would do it.”

He said Brett – *“I really think that God might just be telling me to **share my story.**”*

“But I don't really don't understand why – it doesn't make any sense to me why I would just *share my story* as a staff devotional.”

And I said to him that day – Larry – I really have no idea why either – but how about this – how about you and I meet again next week, and you just tell me your story – and then let's just go from there.

And he agreed.

And so for the past several weeks Larry and I have been meeting and he has been sharing his story with me. But I remember after he came to my office that second week and shared his story.

I looked at him and I said – Larry – I agree – I think you should just tell your story as your devotional. And he looked at me and said – “but why”?

“Don’t you think that everyone that will hear it that day already believes in Jesus? Why would they need to hear my story?”

And I said – you know – you are probably right. But I said – even so – you telling me your story today has reminded me how *powerful* it is when believers share their story with one another.

Now – just a quick pause – I do want to say this –

Larry has not yet given shared his devotional with our staff yet – and I am not going to share any of his story here today. In fact Larry texted me last night and told me that he was working on it. However – even though Larry – or Todd or Eric may not like me saying this – if you would like to hear Larry’s story – I invite you to come to our staff meeting this coming Tuesday afternoon because Larry will be sharing his devotional with our staff this week.

My point this morning is this: Sitting in my office three months ago – listening to Larry share his life story with me – reminded me why this is one of our core practices here at First Pres.

See – here at First Pres – several years ago our elders were led to put together what we call our “Seven Core Practices”. These are seven things that we as a church will hold up as foremost importance among our body.

Seven statements or actions – if you will – that will serve as a framework for how we operate and what we use to measure the health and vitality of our congregation.

And number one on that list is the statement: *Share Who You Are*. Now – to be clear – the order of the seven core practices is not necessarily an order of importance.

But I think it’s fascinating that our elders chose to list this as number one.

Before caring for one another.

Before investing in one another.

Before serving community.

Before creating and sending leaders.

Even before praying together.

Share Who You Are.

Why? Why is this important? Why does this even matter?

As Larry put it that day in my office – why would this even be something that people would need to hear?

And let me just be totally transparent this morning.

Of all of our seven core practices here at First Pres. This probably would have been near the bottom for me. Because of the way that I am wired - this is probably the one that gets me the least excited. There are several on our list of seven core practices that I can get really pumped about.

Investing in people.

Creating and sending leaders.

Reading and practicing Scripture...

But Sharing Who You Are....

Personally – I am a pretty private person.

I don't particularly like people knowing all that much about me! I don't mind telling you all about my daughter or my wife and how awesome they are! But sharing ***who I am*** really hasn't ever been something that I found that necessary.

I am a creature of habit. I find a routine... and for the most part – I stick to that routine.

And listen – if you don't fit into that routine – it's not because I don't love you! It's not because I don't think the world of you! Sometimes I am just really bad about getting out of my routines and sharing who I am with people!

But that day – when Larry asked me: “why would this even be something that people need to hear”?

I was reminded that the ***power of the church*** is not found in how many leaders we send all over the world.

Although – let me be clear - I certainly will champion the importance of creating and sending leaders.

Not only that... but the ***power of the church*** is not found in how well we serve Central Middle School across the street or the community of Edmond–

Although – let me be clear - I certainly will champion the fact that we should serve them – and serve them well – and I believe we do.

Not only that... but the ***power of the church*** is not found in how often we get together in our small groups and Bible studies and read through the Bible.

Although – let me be clear - I certainly will champion the fact that the local church must return to Scripture over and over again and be committed to reading and practicing what Scripture alone says.

I could go on and on through this list this morning- And again - let me be clear – this is a really important list of things to do.

These are necessary – in fact – things to do. These are vital things to do. Will these things cause lives to be changed – and the Gospel to be spread – and the Kingdom of God to be advanced?

Absolutely Yes – without question.

But I want to unequivocally say this morning that I believe that the ***power of the church*** is unearthed when the people who have had their lives changed by Jesus are ***sharing their lives*** with one another.

Why do I think this?

Because when Larry sat in my office and told me his story – it was in that moment that I was ***reminded*** of what my God does. And when I am reminded of what my God does – I am reminded that in Acts chapter one it says the ***power of the Holy Spirit*** lives within me.

And when I am reminded of the power that lives within me – it is then that the power that lives within me is able to be poured out.

And when the people of God are collectively *sharing who they are* - and *what God has done* – and *what God is doing* – and *what their God does* - then it is then that we will see the power of the church poured out in ways that we will not soon forget.

I want to read to you from Scripture an account of a man who had his life changed by Jesus.

Luke chapter 8 beginning in verse 26.

²⁶ Then they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes,^[c] which is opposite Galilee. ²⁷ When Jesus^[d] had stepped out on land, there met him a man from the city who had demons. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs. ²⁸ When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him and said with a loud voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me.” ²⁹ For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many a time it had seized him. He was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the desert.) ³⁰ Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Legion,” for many demons had entered him.³¹ And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss.³² Now a large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside, and they begged him to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. ³³ Then the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and drowned.

³⁴ When the herdsmen saw what had happened, they fled and told it in the city and in the country. ³⁵ Then people went out to see what had happened, and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind, and they were afraid. ³⁶ And those who had seen it told them how the demon-possessed man had been healed. ³⁷ Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked him to depart from them, for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.³⁸ The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him, but Jesus sent him away, saying, ³⁹ ***“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” And he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.***

Now there are other times in Scripture when Jesus does something – and he immediately tells the people – do not tell anyone about this. And I want to state clearly – that I believe there are totally different and interesting reasons for why Jesus says that in those situations.

But church – this is a wild story! This man’s body was filled with demons! And everybody in the community knew it! Or they at least knew that something was wrong! They had shackled this guy and had him guarded!

And when Jesus shows up on the scene Jesus calls the demons out of this man – they jump out of this guy and into a herd of pigs – and the pigs run into the lake and drowned!

WHAT IN THE WORLD!

And this is not one of those times in Scripture where Jesus says – “hey don’t tell anyone about this”. NO!

Jesus looks at the guy and says – explicitly – “GO HOME AND TELL EVERYONE ABOUT THIS!” Go home and tell everyone what has just happened to you!

Go home and SHARE WHO YOU ARE!

You see I think that for many of us – especially those of us who have grown up in church – and maybe even been leaders in the church in some capacity or another – We may have forgotten what it looks like when we share who we are and what Jesus has done! We may have forgotten that the power of the church lies in our willingness to do life with one another and tell each other and remind each other of what God has done for us!

The Scripture that I began with this morning – Acts 4:33 –

It said “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

Let me remind you what had led up this moment in Acts. Two of Jesus’ disciples had been on their way to the temple to pray – They were on their way to do the ordinary, familiar, everyday things that we as Believers do...

They were going to pray.

And they had come across a man - who every single day – was carried to the gate of the temple to lay there and beg because he was crippled and was completely unable to really do anything at all. And this man – cries out to Peter and John to give him some monetary help of some kind.

But instead of giving him money – Peter looks at the man and tells the man – “in the name of Jesus of Nazareth – get up and walk.” And guess what – he does.

Because of this – a whole commotion breaks out. People standing around see what has happened. The religious leaders show up on the scene because now there is a whole commotion breaking out in front of the temple about the fact that this man has been healed in the name of Jesus.

It’s a whole scene.

The Scripture says that five thousand people put their faith in Jesus because of this whole ordeal.

And because of this - Peter and John end up getting thrown in jail for the night. The next day – Peter and John are released. But guess what they were told when they were released?

Acts chapter 4 beginning in verse 18 says:

¹⁸ So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹ But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than

to God, you must judge, ²⁰ for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”²¹ And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened.²² For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.

Listen – do you want to know why they told Peter and John not to say anything about any of this? Because five-thousand people had just put their faith in Jesus because they HEARD about what happened!

How did five-thousand people hear about this?

I’m just going to go out on a limb here... But I’m wondering if the lame man who had been crippled since birth and carried to the temple gate everyday so he could beg for money didn’t run around the whole community telling everyone about what had happened –

And I’m guessing that people started showing up to the temple to hear what in the world Peter and John were up to!

So real quick – just to get back to where we started this story-

Peter and John are released from prison– They are told not to tell anyone about Jesus or about what has happened. So they go and they get together with their friends and other disciples...

And they pray.

And the Scripture says in verse 31:

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ ***And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.***

Don’t miss that.

“WITH GREAT POWER THE APOSTLES WERE GIVING THEIR TESTIMONY.”

So what? What am I trying to say? Why is any of this important or relevant?

You probably don’t remember this- But the last time I spoke about one of our seven core practices here at First Pres – back in February-

I talked about the “awe of God”. And how just a couple of chapters before these Scriptures that we are in today – in Acts 2:42-43 it says that:

“they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers – and awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles”.

And I talked about how the “awe of God” and God’s people praying together were interconnected.

When one happens – the other happens.

When God’s people pray together – they will experience the awe of God!

And this morning I what I am trying to say is that the power of the church – which is found in God’s people sharing who they are – is a direct result of God’s people having experienced the “awe of God”.

Let me say that again –

The power of the church – ***which is found in God’s people sharing who they are*** – is a ***direct result*** of God’s people having experienced the “awe of God”!

BUT there is a danger in what I am saying.

What is that danger? Let me draw you back to the question that I began with this morning.

When was the last time you felt the power of the church?

I want to read to you a letter that a man by the name of BB Warfield wrote to his students.

BB Warfield was a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1827 – 1921.

Which by the way – Pastor Eric went to Princeton Theological Seminary-

Was he there when you were there, Eric?

This is an address that Professor Barfield gave to his seminary students in 1911:

“We are frequently told, indeed that the great danger of the theological student lies precisely in his constant contact with divine things. They may come to seem common to him because they are customary. As the average man breathes the air and basks in the sunshine without ever a thought that it is God in his goodness who makes his sun to rise on him, though he is evil, and

sends rain to him, though he is unjust; so you may come to handle even the furniture of the sanctuary with never a thought above the gross earthly materials of which it is made. The words which tell you of God's terrible majesty or of his glorious goodness may come to be mere words to you – Hebrew and Greek words, with etymologies, inflections and connections in sentences. The reasonings which establish to you the mysteries of his saving activities may come to be to you mere logical paradigms, with premises and conclusions, fitly framed, no doubt and triumphantly cogent, but with no further significant to you than their formal logical conclusiveness. God's stately steppings in his redemptive process may become to you a mere series of facts of history, curiously interplaying to the production of social and religious conditions and pointing mayhap to an issue which we may shrewdly conjecture: but much like other facts occurring in time and space which may come to your notice. It is your great danger. But it is your great danger only because it is your great privilege. Think of what your privilege is when your greatest danger is that the great things of religion may become common to you!... The very atmosphere of your life is these things; you breathe them in at every pore: they surround you, encompass you, press in upon you from every side. It is all in danger of becoming common to you! God forgive you, you are in danger of becoming weary of God!"

Barfield's address was to seminary students. He was telling them that the familiarity of the divine things of God could cause them to lose their awe of God.

His words though are no less true for those of us who have made the divine things of God routine.

We attend church on Sundays and Wednesdays. We sing out during worship. We pray before meals and when our Bible studies gather together. We are familiar with the things of God.

But when the things of God become familiar – church - we are in danger of losing our awe of God. And when we lose our awe of God...

We stop sharing what God has done in our lives. And what God is doing in our lives. And what God does for those who put their faith in him.

And when we stop sharing who we are...

We begin to think that maybe the church has lost its power.

I am here this morning to declare to you that I do not believe the church has lost its power.

Larry reminded me of that.

God has not stopped changing lives. Therefore, the church has not lost its power.

But Church – if we want to see the power of the church – if we want to see God’s power unearthed. If we want to never – ever have to pause when someone asks the question: “when was the last time you felt the power of the church”

Then we must SHARE WHAT GOD HAS DONE.

We must SHARE WHO WE ARE.

And so church – as we leave here this morning –

May you be reminded of what God has done in you.

And may you be challenged to share that with someone.

PRAY