

## It's the message

Acts 4:1-31

February 5, 2006

Did you know that I am older than the Super Bowl? Tonight's game is Super Bowl XL, the fortieth year that this so-named championship football game has been held. But I'm past forty and I can remember a time, a time before there was any Super Bowl!

What did people do? How did advertising agencies survive? What did youth groups do for fundraisers? What did people talk about?

Believe it or not, there was life before the Super Bowl, and if its ratings ever drop so far that it is canceled, there will be life after the Super Bowl. There was life before football, and -- God forbid! -- if football ever fades out of the American way of life, there will be life after football. But for now, football is king and the Super Bowl is its coronation ceremony.

Football is a very American game. It's about being the best, the biggest and, may I say, the baddest! It's about winners and losers, with nothing and no one in between. No losing football player will ever tell you: *I'm just glad to have played in the game!*

It's about figuring out how to come out on top, how to dominate and overwhelm your competition. It's about being smarter, faster, stronger, and about having a better plan. Coaches are more prominent in football than in any other sport, because it's a game not so much about individual athletic performance but about corporate strategy.

Football is a very American game. In football, as in business, as in politics, it's all about winning. In football and in business and in politics, we glorify success. We make gods of the winners and we forget the losers.

Is the same true of our religious life and our religious institutions? Often, yes. We glorify success and we make gods of the winners. The church has its own celebrities, its own cult of success, as much as the entertainment industry or the sports industry or the business community. But there is, I think, a fundamental difference, at least there should be a fundamental difference. Genuine faith doesn't make an idol of winning.

I have long had ambivalent feelings about the notion of success in the church, and reading through Acts has helped me clarify my understanding of the work of the church and its proper goals. I want the church, this church, the church of Jesus Christ as a whole, to grow and prosper, but I am uncomfortable with the idea of growth as an end in itself. I am reluctant to make church growth my overriding aim.

I was exposed in seminary to the research and strategies of the so-called "church growth movement," a movement that continues to influence the church-builders of our day, but so much of it seemed to me calculated, impersonal, number-driven, focussed on objectives, not focussed on individuals, more about achieving goals than about healing wounds. It seemed to me so different -- so different -- from the way Jesus went about doing God's work.

I have made it a point in my ministry to do my best to lead the church in being faithful to God's will and God's way, to think in terms of what is right, instead of what "works." And yet, I have been frustrated sometimes when what is "faithful" doesn't seem to "work," when being more concerned with substance than with style doesn't seem to produce "results." Maybe "results" don't matter. Or maybe faithfulness does work, but in ways different from what we expect or imagine.

I said the book of Acts has helped me clarify my understanding, and today's account, in Acts 4, is a case in point. Peter and John were arrested, after healing a lame man outside the Temple and telling people about the resurrection of Jesus inside the Temple. They were questioned by members of the Jerusalem Council, ordered to cease and desist from talking about Jesus, and released.

When they returned to their fellow believers and related their story, the whole group responded by praying. In response to opposition from political authority and in obedience to divine authority, they prayed, offering their praise to God and asking God for two things. They asked God to allow them to speak God's message with all boldness, and they asked God to keep on healing people as they keep on speaking in the name of Jesus.

What is the goal? What do they pray for? To be able to proclaim the message with boldness. It's about the message.

Notice what they did not pray for. They did not pray for success. They did not pray for growth. They did not pray: *May many believe your message and join our growing church.* They prayed: *May we proclaim your message with all boldness and may you continue to do wonders through the name of Jesus.*

The goal is proclaiming the message. The goal is healing hurts. The results ... are up to God. Growth happens. The book of Acts tells the story of extraordinary growth in the early church, but the believers do not pray for growth. They pray for boldness.

Sometimes we get it backwards. Sometimes we get evangelism backwards. We suppose the object is growing the church, and evangelism is the method for achieving that aim. No, it's not like that. The object is evangelism, and the method is bold proclamation. The work of the church is not growth, it is evangelism, offering to the world a message of good news, a message of comfort and empowerment and liberation and healing and peace.

What holds us back is not the lack of an effective strategy, it is our timidity. That's why when we pray, we should pray for boldness! Are we timid because we are unsure of ourselves? Are we timid because we are unsure of the message? Or are we timid because we don't believe it matters all that much?

It doesn't matter? It doesn't matter? May God make us bold!

As we look back over one hundred and fifty years of being a church of Jesus Christ in this town, we also look forward. As we do, may we remember, it's about the message: the message God has imprinted on our minds and on our hearts; the message of what we have seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears and touched with our own hands; the message of the power of God that raised Jesus from death and is now at work among us. It is useless, useless, to maintain a church, to grow a church, to be a church, if we have nothing to say ...