

## No Other Name

Acts 4:5-12

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

In this account from the Book of Acts, chapter 4, the lectionary committee has really just given us the middle of a whole sequence, so I want to tell you what goes before and after. Before is that they, the Twelve, were standing there in Jerusalem. They had replaced Judas. Along came a crippled and he was healed. Everyone was excited. They knew Jesus had healed, but here it was continuing. What the authorities did was throw the apostles in prison because it had excited and disturbed the people. Then we have the verses for today. Peter stands up and says: "There is no other name under heaven by which we shall be saved."

The authorities were disturbed by this and said you can't do this. You need to shut up. So then in verse 20 comes their response. And they say: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." There was nothing they could do about it. What is hidden to us, because we don't think of these things, is that when Peter says: "There is no other name" he's not just saying we believe in Jesus or Jesus only, he's saying something enormous.

You remember what the name is when you think about Moses and the burning bush. In Exodus 3:14 the Lord says to Moses: "My name is Yahweh." Here then in Acts, instead of Yahweh, is Jesus. That's really saying "No" to the whole Old Testament religion. It's putting Jesus up as God, as Lord. This is found elsewhere, for example, in 1 Cor 12:3, the earliest Christian confession, which is: "Jesus is Lord." It means Jesus is Yahweh. Imagine the claim. You and I may say: That's strange, maybe unsophisticated, maybe intolerant. But basically, that's what it says and why it's so astonishing that they do it.

Nor is this an isolated verse. In John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." Then in 1 Timothy 2:5: "There is one mediator between God and men," not many mediators. What does this mean to say that there is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved?

We have a problem knowing the difference between Christ and culture. We confuse Christ and culture. Two illustrations: The first one has to do with the separation of church and state, the First Amendment to the Constitution. To be sure, we're all for it. It's the great American experiment and it's working. However, the way the evil one works is that he takes our strengths and they end up being our weaknesses.

Richard John Neuhaus, in his book, *The Naked Public Square*, wrote that we have the idea that the public square should be neutral. The First Amendment says we should not establish religion because if you establish religion, you end up with religious wars. However, the flip side leads us to say religion is only a private matter, and the only ultimate

value is tolerance, and then tolerance is God so that all religions are the same, and the big thing is not who God is and the truth of God, but something else. That's the first way that we are caught by the culture.

And the second way is the idea of manifest destiny. When the people of the old world came to this world, they were making a new order of things and understood it to be God's plan. And that's good to break from some of the old traditions and hang-ups. The problem is that some people, instead of asking what is the Christian message, came to believe that the church and the culture were one. That's another the trick of the evil one. It shows itself in four ways.

The first one is: "Everybody believes in the same God, each in his own way." There is nothing more dramatic than this text speaking to that. What Peter is saying is that there is no other name. It also isn't Yahweh. Because when we say God, we say Yahweh is the father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. No Jew is going to say that. The same is true over against Islam and Allah. What Muslims say is that Christians are polytheists, and Jews have the wrong God. But there is a common view among us and in the culture that everybody believes in the same God, just in their own way. It doesn't matter as long as it works for you.

The second one is: God is good, and so finally everything will be good, and we don't really have to worry because God is good. So nothing seriously is going to happen so we don't have to take God too seriously because he's good.

The third one is: We are good. The important thing is that everyone does good as he sees it and everyone does good together. Even we think of someone: "Well, she was a good woman," as if that had anything to do with Christianity. It's a common view and even in the Book of Acts they talk about "the righteous Gentile." It's someone outside of the Christian sphere.

Finally, there is the understanding of God as the butler. God is the butler, the one who helps out when I need help, and it's really a version of Maslow's table of needs. I have needs for food, culture, and religion. As I need something, the butler gives it to me. If I need experience or spirituality, then God the butler gives it to me.

It's important that we see plainly that in the New Testament there is one Lord and one way of salvation. And it's said very plainly here. We are caught in various cultural ways of thinking that we confuse with the Gospel.

You must not think that this means that suddenly this is intolerant and rigid. If you study religions, you find that every religion has its own self-identity as a way of saying, it's this and when you say it's this, it also means it's not that. Every religion is just as intolerant, and there is nothing more intolerant than the Hindus who say: "We're the ones accepting

everything, but it's going to be our way," and that's the basically the intolerance of the Hindu.

There are two consequences of all this for us in our way of looking at and living Christianity. The first one is seen best by the illustration of what happened at the end of the First and Second Centuries. The way they tested Christians was to ask them to burn incense in front of an image of the emperor because he was understood as one of the gods. That seems a trivial thing. You can do that. And many died because they said: "We are not doing that."

We have no other name but Jesus Christ as God. That may seem incidental. It may seem primitive. It may seem strange. The same thing is going on now. When someone says to you: "Well, there are many ways of knowing God and many ways of going to God," and you have to agree to that, and you do, you've just sold out. If somebody says to you: "Everybody tries to be good in his own way and you just do the best you can," you've sold out.

In fact, what happens is that all of that diminishes the cross, and that's the second thing. And the basic thing about being a Christian is that the cross alone in Jesus Christ is our salvation.

What it comes down to, which is why it's important to see the broader scope of this passage, is what it says then when they are told to shut up in Acts 4:20 and they respond: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" -this is our identity. This is salvation. It's not just our identity for the sake of having identity, but that there is salvation in none other, and salvation is at stake.

Thank God, he has given us salvation and we can bring it to others. Amen