

# Sermon Text for March 22, 2020

*by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

Zechariah 8:14-17, Acts 24:22-27

**“Speaking truth to power...what does that mean?”**

It has been a little over a week since any of last met together in this building. The last meeting we had was Friday evening, March 13 at 8pm which was the Task Force that recommended that for now our responsibility as a Christian community was to keep people safe. It was a smart decision, it was the right decision, but how are you now? Do you find yourself going to bed at night more tired than in the past. A combination of physical and mental and emotional exhaustion as so much is up in the air and we are wondering what will happen next as the intensity and the speed by which decisions are being made ramps up.

There simply is more stress in all of our lives now, which makes it even more important that we are in touch with each other even more now than ever. If you are praying and thinking of someone then just pick up the phone and call them and let them know. This time apart is creating a new normal for us. I feel as if this whole past week I was spending most of my time in creating a new normal for our lives together. I spent most of my time figuring out how can we be the body of Christ in a different way than what we have been used to doing up to this point.

You see, I went to seminary to learn how to do church and how to help people come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ within an institution that meets together, that shares life physically together. We know how to do worship. We know how to do Sunday School. We know how to do Bible Study. We know how to do prayer breakfasts and mid-week programs. And we are really good at it, the growth of this church over these past years has been exciting and has been an affirmatio of our strategies and our programs and all that we have been able to do together.

But there is a certain self-centered power in only doing what you know. There is a certain temptation to think that things are going well because you are at the helm, or you have created a system that works. When it is all taken away from you, like it has for us, our power is completely stripped away and we are forced to rely upon one thing and one thing alone. The power and the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That is what brings us together and keeps us together, not the programs or the activities that we have been so good at enacting with our own gifts and our skills. I have come to realize that in this time we are forced to simply rely

upon the power of Jesus, and not our abilities. I don't know about your, but that has been humbling, but also curiously invigorating because now it is no longer up to us whether something succeeds or not. It is up to the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit which is right where we should have been all along. We are forced to ask the question, where does the power reside, in our system, in our institution, in our structure, or on the solid rock of Jesus Christ.

Often times the status quo works in our favor to the detriment of Jesus because we find the power residing in ourselves. When we speak the truth of Jesus to the power found inside of us we reveal a new life. I hope you are discovering a new life as you are stripped away of all that you once knew and all that you once relied upon. I hope that in this time of sudden and dramatic change from one way of life to another that we discover the power in complete reliance on Jesus. Zechariah and Paul both knew this and they found themselves often speaking truth to the powers that be in trying to show them the presence of God even while the powers that be relied on their own hunches and their own, well power over and against the power of God. Let's read.

## **READ**

Remember I had laid out all of my sermon titles well before we found ourselves in our homes watching the services on our computers. This week I was determined to redo all of my sermon themes but as I started I realized that God had once again used what I thought was for one matter and was able to change it to address exactly what we are facing in our new realities today. What a strange sermon title, and you probably think it was meant to be provocative, but it really wasn't. Speaking truth to power, what does that mean? Well, first of all that phrase, speaking truth to power, became first introduced to us here in the US in 1955 from a publication which came from the Quakers out of nearby Pendle Hill, which is less than an hour from here. They defined this as someone who was putting themselves in danger by addressing truths about realities within society that the government powers refused to acknowledge which could affect the safety and well being of the messenger as they delivered these truths.

You could go a lot of different directions on this one, but let's look at Zechariah whose primary responsibility, as all prophets in the Old Testament carried this responsibility, was to speak truth to power. Remember all of the OT prophets were given their task to speak God's words to the rulers of the day and for the most part all of them were scorned and looked down upon not only by the rulers of the people of God, but also by the people of God as well. They

did not win any popularity contests even though according to Scripture they were responsible for speaking God's truth. As they spoke the truth to the rulers of the day the rulers continued to rely upon their own power, upon their own wisdom, upon their own understanding of world events and were able to gather support from the people to discredit the prophets of old, including Zechariah.

Today, especially in vs. 15 we hear what we ought to hear from our leaders today, do not fear. Zechariah states in the verses before these that things got really bad, things may even get worse, but in the midst of all things God still remains in control. So while you are living under a different reality, Zechariah tells those in power, do the following: tell the truth, vs.16, be righteous, vs.16, seek out peace, vs.16, and then in vs.17 a concept that you hear every Sunday, render no one evil for evil. Zechariah tells the leaders of the people of Israel and also tells the people of Israel, strip away all those things in which you relied upon in the past and focus only in the presence of Almighty God and you will find yourself speaking the truth, being righteous, seeking out peace, and returning no one evil for evil. When we stop focusing on ourselves, this is what results, this is how we speak truth to power. It is the power of the Gospel which cannot be overcome.

When we get back to our friend Paul we find ourselves finally in a Scripture where he is not about to get killed, but rather he has worked his way up from being accused by the people of Israel at that time, and specifically by the religious leaders of that time in whom all the power of the nation of Israel resided, to speaking to the governor of the land in whom all the political power of the land resided. This ruler's name is Felix and he seemed to like Paul because we being the Scripture by reading that he gave Paul certain freedoms that other prisoners did not enjoy and he even allowed his friends to stop by and visit. But he also reminded Paul every chance that he got that he was in power, and not Paul. Paul was still under his control. People in power tend to do that, they tend to flex their muscles just to remind people that they are in control.

He delays Paul's trial because he wanted to have his wife listen to what Paul had to say. It is interesting because this ruler, Felix was married to Drusilla who had been born into a family of power. Her siblings were Herod Agrippa II and Bernice, both historical and powerful figures. She had been married to a foreign king whom she had left in order to marry an even more powerful man in this Felix that we have in front of us. This is important because when Paul is

brought before Felix and Drusilla he is face to face with people whose primary and sole interest was to maintain their power. You see power looks for an opportunity to enrich themselves while they are in power.

So when Paul is front of these people he is sure that he is able to work within the empire but by following the guidelines that Jesus has established before hand, not the guidelines laid out before us by society or culture, or those in power have established. As a result Paul was invited by Felix to speak about Jesus to his wife who was Jewish and might find it interesting at an esoteric level, while Paul when he did speak addressed what Jesus requires of us as disciples of Jesus Christ, look at vs.25, Paul spoke about justice, self-control, and the coming judgment. Not at all what they expected, but it was Paul's speaking truth to justice that was similar to Zechariah's address to the rulers and the people.

You see we are at an advantage as disciples of Jesus Christ. Our power is not found in the purse as Felix tried to bribe Paul in order to free him. Our power is not found in being able to tell people what to do and how to do it, our power is found in Jesus Christ who requires a new way of life on our part. When we live out this new way of life this speaking truth to power can put us in a precarious position. People are not going to like it, we are going to be different from those around us. This new reality we read in vs.25 frightened Felix because often the truth strips us of our power, and people like to hold onto their power. The truth we preach completely strips us of our power and lays it at the feet of Jesus.

So family, people of God, how powerful are you feeling now? I don't know about you but I'm feeling pretty puny in regards to being able to dictate my own life at this moment. I'll speak for myself and tell you that over this week I have spent more time on this carpet on my knees pleading and calling out to God for each one of you that God would protect you and keep you than I have in my 9 years before combined. I, for one, feel powerless, and as a result I know that I am right where God wants me to be so that God can use me, use us, because our reliance is not on how good we do church, but rather on how much we have given the power over to Jesus.

As you strip away any of your pre-conceived ideas of your faith, step into a truth that has no power residing in the one bringing the message, but where all the power resides in the one who has sent us, Jesus the Christ. Next week on Tuesday we begin under the leadership of June Stum, who by the way has promised to lead from afar and from her phone, our social ministries hub as we open our hearts, not our doors because our hearts don't have doors, so they are always

open, for those in need. As we open our food bank for a few hours during the week it will put the fear of God in Satan who is looking for every opportunity in this time to ensure that we do not gather in a meaningful way and that we forget those guidelines that Zechariah gave us: tell the truth, be righteous, work for peace, and return no one evil for evil. The power of Christ cannot be broken, he is in charge, and we give thanks for that. Amen.