

“Define This!”
Acts 4:1-22
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Well, of course, the Swine Flu pandemic is no laughing matter, but what fun is church without a little humor, right? So let me draw your attention to the video monitors for tonight’s little public service announcement:

IMPORTANT: SWINE FLU ADVICE



Don’t do THIS!

Now, you may be wondering what this important advice has to do with the Apostle Peter and the episode about which we heard tonight. Well, to understand the link, you must first know the answer to the following question: “What is the difference between a dead lawyer in the middle of the road and a dead skunk in the middle of the road?” Yes, indeed, the answer is that there are skid marks in front of the skunk. (I could never tell this joke in my last church because there were too

many lawyers.) Yes, tonight's story is about lawyers, or at least people who thought they should have been lawyers, instead of the rulers, elders, and scribes that they were. And they ask Peter a typically lawyerly question, the answer to which was not as simple as the one you see above you right now. "By what power or by what name did you do *this*?"

Now, especially because the lectionary picks up the story precisely in its middle, you may be forgiven for wondering what "this" is. And here is the background. Peter and John, following Jesus' ascension into heaven, have been doing just what Jesus told them to do, you know, preaching, teaching, and healing. And it happens that one day as they were just outside the Temple, they healed a man who had been crippled for more than forty years, "lame from birth," to use the precise Biblical language. And as you might expect, such a healing attracted some attention, with people being quite astonished at such a marvelous occurrence. And, having attracted a crowd, and not being one to waste such a good opportunity, Peter proceeds to spell out for them the story of Jesus, and especially the role of their leaders in bringing about his death. He even goes so far as to proclaim the not surprisingly unpopular truth notion that they should "Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out...[because] when God raised up his servant, he sent him first to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." Proclaiming their ways wicked is not exactly the best way to win friends and influence people.

And so they were arrested and held overnight before being interrogated and asked that typically lawyerly question: “By what power or by what name did you do *this*?” Now this question isn’t lawyerly simply because it was asked in the midst of a pseudo-courtroom, but rather because it was a trick question. You see, in the original Greek text, and even in the context of the story, the specific reference to “this” is left intentionally vague. Which “this?” The “this” of healing the man? Or the “this” of teaching in the temple? By leaving the “this” hanging out there undefined, the rulers, elders, and scribes hope to intimidate the humble fishermen, to perhaps pull them into some kind of incriminating statements, or at least to make them look like the uneducated riff-raff they expected them to be. It’s kind of like when your wife says, “So, are you sorry?” without specifying exactly what you are supposed to be sorry about. It is a much more effective interrogation technique than waterboarding, I assure you. Trying to answer that question, men will spill far more than they ever believed possible. Instead of using torture, they should have just rounded up some al-Qaeda wives and had them ask their husbands, “So, are you sorry?”

But the rulers, elders, and scribes were overlooking a crucial element in the courtroom that day, and that was the presence of the Holy Spirit, the divine weight in the scales of justice. And with the Holy Spirit filling him, Peter takes their disingenuous question and turns it back on them, saying, “Let it be known to you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health

by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This is ‘the stone that was rejected by you the builders; it has become the cornerstone.’ There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” English translations of this passage try to help us make sense of Peter’s words in verse 11 by adding to them; the translation I read from tonight adds the word “Jesus” to try to make clear the reference to the stone that was rejected and became the cornerstone, and others add “he,” but by doing so, they cause us to miss the Holy Spirit’s brilliance. You see, what Peter says here, with the Spirit’s help, is a bold play on words. “This” is the stone, he says in an ironically specific answer to their vague question. It is the same sort of way Jesus used the phrase “I am” in the Gospel of John to refer to himself, to express through himself the eternal character of God who first spoke those words in the book of Exodus. When Peter says, “*This* is the stone that was rejected by you the builders,” he is making clear that the only thing in the world worth referring to, worth talking about, is Jesus himself. It is not Peter and John who have healed the man lame from birth, but the name of Jesus Christ. It is not the words Peter and John spoke in the temple, but rather the word of life, Jesus Christ, the word spoken by God the Creator, that caused people to believe in and follow Jesus. It is all about “this” one, the only one, the one who really needs no name at all, but in whose name only all good deeds are done, in whose name only all are healed, in whose name only all are saved. “This” is no

joking matter. Rather, “this” is the subject matter of the church of Jesus Christ, and all its individual believers, and the only subject matter. “This” is the good news that must be told, must be shared, and must be lived. “This” is what we celebrate tonight. “This” is the body and blood of Christ we will share again tonight gathered around the Lord’s Table. Thanks be to God for “this.” Amen.