



“Things of God and Man”

a sermon by

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Acts 5:27-42

Today we will look at the last chapter of the first of a series of persecutions faced by the disciples in the early church. This is found in Acts 5:27-42. In our early steps beyond the resurrection, we have looked within the life of the early community of Christians that are called together after the resurrection as the new body of Christ, living and breathing, called to be the spoken Word of God in the world.

In the first chapter of Acts, we picked up the first lines of book two of Luke's gospel, and met the disciples staring up into the sky after Jesus, and called to go forth. Last week we looked at the community gathered after Pentecost in prayer and table fellowship and teaching in chapter two, and this week we meet the disciples after they have stirred up a bit of a ruckus. You see, Peter healed a crippled beggar in the name of Jesus. This stirred up the emotions of the crowd who were amazed at the sign of God in their midst and astonished by the disciples' teaching about Jesus as the culmination of the law and the only way to salvation. This stirred up the priests, captain of the temple, and Saducees, who arrested them and, with many elders, rulers, and scribes, the high priest, and Caiaphas, warned the disciples not to teach or heal in the name of Jesus because, essentially, it made them look bad for killing him and threatened their authority. Peter and John are released, continue to teach in the temple and heal the sick of the city, when they are arrested again and threatened, only this time are freed by an angel of God while they awaited their trial in prison. They went straight to the temple and were teaching in the name of Jesus when the entire body of elders of Israel assembled to take action against them but found their prison cells empty. They were finally found and brought before the assembly.

"When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them-- in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every

day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.”

If you were asked to identify yourself with any person in this story, who would it be? If you had to pick any character to illustrate where you find yourself at this point in time in any given circumstance, whom would you choose? This passage fires on a lot of levels, which is why I’m curious. On the one hand, there are the apostles – a courageous few who stand in the face of the world with its authorities and spit in its eye – in a good way, of course. They have the Spirit on their side and proclaim the gospel well beyond the no trespassing signs and police barricades. They can look the oppressor in the face and say that is never ok that a body of love should hang from a tree and so they are going to keep proclaiming that love that it might live forever. But they are not belligerent, just persistent because there was something new to teach – a different way of living and believing that few else could see. Persistent because salvation is at stake. The church is at stake and they have been commissioned by Christ and stand on righteous ground. We are conditioned to try to identify ourselves with these chosen because it is their book, after all, and they are members of our church at that. Much is at stake in this matter and it wasn’t at all glamorous, for while a gathering of twelve would rejoice with Peter and John for being flogged for the sake of Christ, in just a chapter, only eleven would live to spread the gospel.

And then there are the members of the Sanhedrin, which is another way of saying the Supreme Court of Israel – actually, it was like the Supreme Court and the Vatican rolled into one except they were Jewish. Perhaps we might see a bit of ourselves in this group of elders. They had the confidence of tradition as wind at their backs as they tried to quiet the small-time fisherman turned superstars because of their allegiance to a martyr and a few impressive showings of healing that were, admittedly, hard to argue with. They, too, stood on holy ground when they argued their cause – the covenant was theirs first and their identity as a chosen people was at stake with this guy, Jesus, who offered to share it with everyone despite no one’s adherence to the laws that were so precious and the rituals required for purity. It would profane everything.

And then, of course, there are the crowds, who, as we know, are just trying to figure everything out. So here we have the faithful spreading a new way of life, the faithful preserving an old way of life, and the faithful trying to figure out what the heck is going on. Does any of this feel familiar?

Many commentators of this passage only really allow us to focus on the apostles in their acts – as we said, it is their book. For them, the lines of faith and righteousness are drawn clearly between the Word and the world – the Word and acts of the apostles, and the world of the dangerous elders and scribes and chief priests of Israel, with the only mingling of the two occurring when the world of the crowds is slowly converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are often given little choice but to connect with the apostles just by virtue of the volume of time spent on their activity in relation to all else in this text, and Luke’s writing begs this with his implicit knowing smile in the record he keeps of the apostles’ journeys. And yet I can’t let go of my sense that at any given point in our

lives we could identify with each group in this scripture, and there is perhaps yet another layer of meaning to be discerned.

Though this passage illustrates the tensions inherent between believers in Christ and non-believers to be sure, it seems to tell just a poignantly the story of the faithful seeking to reconcile with faithful. Believers seeking to silence believers. People of God fighting to preserve the integrity of the people of God against the threat of the people of God. Each in their own eyes charged with the preservation and perpetuation of truth. Each compelled to distinguish between the things of God and man, all standing on holy ground with salvation at stake, and therein lies the rub. One scholar quotes Paul's second letter to the Corinthians to illustrate those early persecutions of the apostles when he writes, "We are in difficulties on all sides, but never cornered; we see no answer to our problems, but never despair; we have been persecuted, but never deserted; knocked down, but never killed." But I would imagine that, in this narrative, probably every member of the apostles and Sanhedrin alike would echo its sentiments.

Within academia it has been argued that in America in particular we have managed to reduce rational argumentation to a battle of the extremes – sucking all the life out of debate and disagreement by places ourselves on equally unmovable ends of a spectrum as we all stake our claims on the truth with regard to politics, religion, and morality, and fight with a certainty that we are defending that which is surely of God and not man. In this way, we are truly color blind as everything is seen in black and white. Reflecting on the sad media spectacle of the Terry Schaivo case and hearing words I would not repeat in church and condemnations I would not utter to my gravest enemy pour out of the mouths of Christians on both sides of the fence on this and many other issues, I would not disagree with this assessment.

But is this not also and often the case in our own lives as well, in such spheres as friendships, relationships with loved ones, ideas about the church, in business partnerships, and parenting. In all these realms and so many more, do we not find ourselves either digging in our heels as the Pharisees and elders for fear of being moved or toppled by a new gospel or throwing a new order in the face of tradition for fear of stifling the process of transformation?

And so, while the apostles are surely the subject of our text, it is the wisdom of the rabbi that lingers. Gamaliel was one of the most respected Pharisees of his time; when he later dies it is said that an entire book of the law died with him. I picture him as a wise old sage who doesn't often say much but people listen when he does. Clearly he has heard this argument before – seen his colleagues and friends rise up in fear and in anger over a new order that has come knocking on the doors of their status quo that was ordained by God. He is one that truly recognizes what is at risk when one insists on obeying God rather than any human authority, but also sees the danger of holding so tightly to a holy authority that one misses a new truth being delivered in unlikely ways. And with this clarity he delivers a word of truth to the council that they needed desperately to hear, and speaks a word of truth to us as well. For he says to the leaders, "keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is

of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” And in that moment releases their white-knuckle grasp upon their own understanding and encourages them to open their minds to the possibility that the truth of God lies outside the temple they had constructed for him. He concedes that the gospel of God’s love for the people and will for the salvation of humankind might actually have been delivered through the Messiah the tradition had long expected and waits for still and warns them not to worship the waiting but to seek out what is being waited for.

Isn’t this a voice of reason we could use today? In all of our truth-seeking, when we are faithful pushing against faithful, in all of our certainties about what is right and good and righteous and of God, whether we identify with the red-faced elders of the council or with the apostles who surely had to spend at least a few sleepless nights wondering how they were going to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth in an era long before e-mail, isn’t there a dose of grace in this reminder?

I shared with a group this weekend a bit of wisdom a pastor passed along to me one day. We were speaking of a controversial issue in the church and he had been asked, “How do you know what to do if we believe that God alone is the Lord of conscience and everyone seems to know what is the right way, and every way is different?” He said, “Well, I do three things. First I pray for guidance. And when I receive what I believe I am being faithfully called to do I pray for the strength to do it. And then I pray for forgiveness for ever trying to figure it out in the first place.”

The new order of the reign of Jesus Christ is still being revealed to the world. Christians in all places are being faithfully led in many different directions and so we are challenged to believe that in all those directions God is indeed the guiding force, moving us and shaping us toward where we need to be. It is up to us to reconcile with the fact that if anything is of human origin it will fail, but if it is of God nothing will stop it. The Lord will take care of the rest. Amen.