

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

Grace to you and Peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen

I want to put our lesson from Acts into prospective, into the context; in order to gain what I think is the full impact of what is going on in our first lesson tonight. Now Peter and the disciples (none of them are named other than Peter so we have to assume the other eleven are there with them, and yes it is eleven remember that even though Judas killed himself, then at the very beginning of the Book of Acts they brought another guy, a guy named Matthias to replace Judas so that there would be twelve although together) Peter and the apostles are still there in Jerusalem. The Spirit had descended upon them (we get in the second chapter of Acts as we'll celebrate in a few weeks on Pentecost). The community of believers continues to grow by leaps and bounds. Acts says that every day more and more people are added to the ranks of the believers. The apostles are so filled with the power of the Lord God Almighty that the "regular" folks are taking their sick friends, their sick relatives; they're lining them up in the street so that as Peter and the other Apostles walk past them, they want their SHADOW to just fall upon these people so that they may be healed. They're not asking them to touch these folks, they're not even asking for them to speak a word. They're just waiting for their SHADOW to fall upon them to be healed.

The religious powers that be, the high priest, the Sadducees (the Sadducees are kind of like the temple police, they make certain that all of the rules about the temple are obeyed. They're different from the Pharisees; the Pharisees are the folks who teach the law. The Pharisees are the ones who make certain the law is obeyed. So the Sadducees are the temple, the Pharisees are the law) the high priest and the Sadducees are the religious powers. They don't like it that so many of "their" people are turning away from "their" ways and following this Jesus character. So they have the apostles arrested. This isn't the first time: back in chapter 4, Peter and John are arrested and they're brought before the Sanhedrin, that's the big religious council, because they have been preaching, healing, and teaching in the name of Jesus. They were ordered to keep their mouths shut and then they were released. They were released in large part because the religious leaders fear not God, but they fear an uprising of the *people* if they didn't let John and Peter go.

So here they are, again, the disciples once again called on the carpet here. They are arrested because they won't keep quiet. Apparently they also can't be kept in prison because once they are in prison, during the night an angel of the Lord, shows up, takes them out of prison, closes up the door again and tells them to go out and start preaching once again in Jesus' name. The guards, when they discover the empty cells, report the disappearance, and while they are in the very act of reporting the fact that these guys are no longer in the cell, they get this report that these guys that *were* in the cell are back in the temple again teaching and preaching and healing in Jesus' name. So they send out the guards, they're rounded up, they are *not* beaten (the guards are very careful because these guys

are afraid of the commoners). They round up everybody, they bring them back to the Sanhedrin and Peter - remember Peter, the guy that on Maundy Thursday we were reminded that Peter wanted Jesus not to wash just his feet, but his whole body. Peter, the guy who up on the mountain top blurts out, "Oh Lord, Lord, we got to build three little shrines to honor you and Elijah and Moses." Peter, who not all that long ago from our reading tonight, Peter DENIED Jesus not once, not twice, but THREE times) Peter now suddenly has gotten his spine and he's standing in front of these folks, and these folks who have not only the religious power, but the political power, and he stands before them and he says this great line: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." (V29) In other words, he says, 'we're doing what we're doing because we have to obey a higher power.' He goes on to say, 'you all killed him, you religious leaders. But God raised him up now we are witnesses to that and so too is the Spirit of God with whom God has filled us and so we are listening, we are obeying, the one who is WAY more powerful than you are right here in this little religious political enclave.'

Now as WE might expect, that doesn't necessarily go over all that well with the folks who are part of that political religious enclave. FORTUNATELY though, for them, they have a "voice of reason" going on in the shape of a guy called Gamaliel. He is a Pharisee in the council. A Pharisee, if you remember, is a teacher of the law. He's respected by the people there in the council, and Gamaliel gives this amazing piece of advice. Now all this is happening after our reading tonight. Gamaliel says, "If this movement is of human origin, it will pass. No more will happen." He gives a couple of examples of people that got followers behind them, but once they were dead their movement disbursed. The people left, they didn't hear anything more of those folks. If however, Gamaliel says, if these men ARE sent by God, IF God is behind their words, if God is behind their actions, if God is indeed behind their preaching, there's first of all not a single thing we can do to stop it and if we try to stop it we will find ourselves going against God Almighty.

So the religious powers that be have the apostles flogged, whipped, and order them not to speak the name of Jesus. Actually, it is kind of interesting cause throughout this whole thing, never once do the religious powers that be Utter the name of "Jesus," they keep talking about him, or the one in whose name you preach (he must be kind of like Voldemort in the Harry Potter series - "he who must not be named"). They say, 'do not preach in this man's name.' and after being whipped, they are released. And the chapter ends with "every day, in the temple, and at home, the apostles did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah."

The two verses that stick out to me. One from our reading and one shortly thereafter. <sup>29</sup>"We must obey God rather than any human authority" and <sup>41</sup>"as the apostles left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of God's name." With that first verse, we get what I think is the predominate 3-fold theme that runs throughout not only the Book of Acts, but not only the New Testament, but throughout all of scripture, that we as believers are called to Please God above all, are called to Serve God above all, and that we are called to Obey God above all.

*Homiletics Online*, which is an internet source that I use for a lot of my sermon preparations goes on to explain; That to PLEASE God means to seize the moment

and to put one's present at risk. To SERVE God means to sacrifice the moment and to put one's future at risk. To OBEY God means to surrender the moment and to put one's past at risk.

To follow God is not an easy thing. To truly follow God is not a safe thing. As followers of Christ, as baptized believers, we are NOT called to please everyone, even though that is often what people think religion is supposed to do. What they often think that Christianity is all about, pleasing other people. As believers, as Christians in the Lutheran tradition, when we say *We must obey God rather than any human authority*, that does NOT mean that we are called to please our membership. It does NOT mean that we're called to please all of the folks in Camp Hill, Enola, Lemoyne, New Cumberland, Mechanicsburg or wherever. We are NOT called to please our pastors or our youth, or the Women of Trinity or Lutheran Men in Mission/Masterbuilders or the choir or Faith X or the kitchen crew of ANYBODY. When we say that "*We must obey God rather than any human authority*," that means that we are called first, and foremost to please God.

Now if in serving God someone happens to wave at you without using all of their fingers because you've got a little "fish" on the back of your car, that's not suffering because you're trying to please God. That's not suffering for the sake of Jesus' name. If somebody laughs at you for carrying a Bible, if you're carrying a Bible for show, you're not really trying to please God and that's not really suffering anyway. If you're scoffed at for going to worship, that's a little bit closer to trying to please God, but it's not really persecution like what Peter went through. If your boss purposely schedules you to work on a Sunday morning **Knowing** that you want to go to worship, well you can always come to Saturday Night worship, but that's a whole lot closer to suffering to the persecution that Peter and the apostles went through in Acts 5.

Obedying God above human authority, though, does NOT mean, as well, that we ignore our government, because the Bible also calls us to be good citizens. We are called to serve our country regardless of whatever political party happens to be in office. That's what Martin Luther, that German guy, meant when he talked about the 'two kingdoms.' He talked about God and the world, God and government. We are called to be good citizens. We have it right in scripture, though, that God and country are not one and the same.

Still, we are called to serve God above all human authority. To serve God in how we treat one another. To serve God at work, at school, at home. To serve God in all that we do. And if in serving God, we face persecution, if in serving God others don't like us we shouldn't be surprised. It happened to the apostles, it happened to Jesus. And still we are called to serve God above all others.

Amen.

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