

April 11, 2010

Acts 5:27-39

When they had brought (*the apostles in*) 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!"

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Times are a little hard right now for some of us. For others who are out of work, or had a home foreclosed, the times are harder still. One seems to precipitate the other: lose your job, and without substantial savings, it becomes nearly impossible to make those mortgage payments, and pretty soon the bank is breathing down your neck. This condition has affected everything and especially giving to non-profit organizations like churches. It was nearly a knock out combination when the failure of so many banks and Wall Street financial institutions had to be bailed out combined with the day our trust fund died.

Fortunately enough of us believed in this particular institution, this Community of Faith Presbyterian Church, that we have kept afloat thanks to your presence and your giving, and your willingness to work.

Turn on AM radio, or one of the cable news networks on TV. The news is terribly depressing. It's hard to recall a time in the Congress when there has been less bipartisanship and the most creative thing to come out of Washington DC lately are new things to call or label the opposition party. Shock jocks on radio and TV have been coming up with alarming reports about things as ridiculous as the legitimacy of our President's citizenship. Congressmen and women have been threatened because of

their vote on the comprehensive health care package, a rasher of bacon that Mr. Obama promised to bring home while campaigning for the job he now holds. It is one of the reasons why so many voted for him.

But you wouldn't know that if all you had to listen to was the rancor that has arisen as the result of the debate of the issues related to health care, and the evil that has spread abroad since the bill was passed. Am I for or against this legislation? Doesn't matter; it's not relevant where my vote would have gone because on November 4, 2008, my vote was no more or less valuable than was yours. But I mention this not because I want you to write a nice or nasty note to this or that elected official, but because I want to set a scene, to reflect on the times and how tough they are, and how mean spirited.

And if this is not enough, Jack Kleier has been picking on me. He's been a pain in the neck ever since the first of the year when he started playing fast and loose with the "E" word. He likes to sneak up on me, throws a verbal hammer lock on me that is worthy of something out of the World Wrestling Federation, and while I am totally immobile, begins to regale me about one of my least favorite topics in the church, that's right, you guessed it, the "E" word, EEEEvangelism! E as in Egad!!!

In the midst of all of this angst and anguish, one day last week as I was sorting papers on my desk I came across a particular document that caught my attention. What it was doing on my desk, I have no idea, but if you have ever seen the surface of my desk on a bad day, you would not be surprised if I discovered a Gutenberg Bible, or maybe a piece of the true cross, or one of Jefferson's drafts of the Declaration of Independence. In this case it was a bulletin insert for the week of March 20-27, 2005. That's right. It was the same piece of paper we glance are asked to follow along with during the announcements so everybody will know what's going on.

I doubt this was any of Jack's doings. Actually I'm leaning more toward holding God responsible for the particular discovery. It contained the names of a number of people to pray for, among those names were "Bertie" Barrett, Mae Kramer, Helen Mussman, Betty Reeves, Millie Hodge, and Allene Mills.

Then I thought that our attendance at worship on Sunday has been dropping every year since I've been here. It's hard to deny. In 1996 when I arrived here as pastor of the Covington Church attendance at worship was roughly double what it is now. Most of the people who have left us, have not really left us. They died. People have not come to replace them. Maybe this is God's way of getting our attention.

Is this religious thing good for us? If your answer and mine is yes-- then what is it that keeps us from talking about it with others? If we bought a car and believed that we had been well treated and paid a fair price for the car, wouldn't we want tell others about it? Or if we knew of a store that sold really good clothes, wouldn't we want to share that information so others would shop there and it wouldn't go out of business, thus depriving us of our good place to buy clothes? What about a restaurant? Same idea... Funny that we are willing to talk about mundane things like the quality of our car, a good place to shop for clothes, and a good place to eat, but when it comes to religion it personal. It's

embarrassment is what it is-- that's what I believe. I have found that many people are afraid to talk about their faith because people who do talk about it seem to know so much more about the Bible, or about Christian doctrine and dogma, and gee whiz, I'm just afraid if I said anything to somebody, they might think I hadn't been listening, or they would get into an argument with me and I wouldn't be able to defend what I believe.

If that's how you feel I've got a whole lot of good news for you-- that's in addition to the gospel. First of all you don't have to get into an argument with anybody about religion. The fact is that *nobody* knows very much about God, and if I have taught you anything over these past years, Jesus did everything backwards anyway. It was his big problem.

We believe he was unique among all people. We confess that he is God, was with God from before the beginning, but the people of his time were expecting someone very different-- a real king, not somebody riding into town on a "colt, the foal of an ass." So are we. We don't spend much time thinking about the master of all must be the servant of all, or the first will be last and the last first; and in addition, when was the last time you read the Beatitudes, especially the version in Luke 6? Blessed are the poor, are you kidding me?

That sort of teaching just doesn't sell in the USA. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe I shouldn't be beating that drum so loudly. We want to be like Jesus, but maybe we don't want to be *that much* like Jesus. People might think we were crazy. People might mistake us for the early Christians that Paul referred to-- as those who had become "fools for the sake of Christ."

Believing that the "many who are first will be last" and "the last first" sounds pretty crazy to me, but we find the remark in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It must have made sense to them.

Now let's go back in time to our lesson for this morning. Like us today, they were fresh from the resurrection experience. It hadn't been long since that whole empty tomb event had happened and they were beyond excited about it. Last Sunday I spoke to you about a more approachable, but no less dramatic resurrection as together we considered our own lives and thought about times we were raised up out of a spiritual death and placed on our feet once again.

If you think about it you might arrive where I did, and I'm not saying I'm right, but we approach resurrection from not only the story in the Bible but from any number of other stories we have heard about other people, and any number of experiences in your own life when, gosh darn it, there was no other way to explain the turn around in your life or that of someone you know except that God was powerfully involved in it. Why? I have no idea. Why this person and not that person. I don't know. It might just be that something wonderful happened for no other reason than to remind us of the message that those early Christians were proclaiming all over Jerusalem.

And imagine, it was dangerous work! They had watched Jesus die. It wouldn't be long

before they learned of Stephen's death by stoning, and still they showed up each day, in and around the temple, proclaiming essentially Peter's message to the Sanhedrin, "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."

It's not nearly so dangerous to do that today. But here's something else-- that kind of message told with that kind of "in your face" bravado, is the kind of evangelism that hurts the church more than helps it. There's a reason that its called the "old, old, story" and that's because people have heard it and heard it, and it just hasn't made much difference. If I come across it on TV, I don't know if there is anybody in this sanctuary who can hit the remote button faster than I can.

So if they've heard the story, you might have to risk telling somebody your story, and how God put you in that pew.

It's not bragging if it's the truth. And part of giving back might be telling just that story, your story of God in Jesus Christ and how it brought you here.