

Civil Disobedience

September 30, 2018

Acts 5:17-32

Sometimes I do not like God's sense of timing at all. In our ongoing study of the book of Acts, this morning we come to Acts 5:17-32, a recounting of the apostles' second appearance before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish authorities in the land. This passage has been on our schedule for well over a month now. But as you all know, this past week has seen a current situation play out in Washington that will surely cloud all of our thoughts this morning. We cannot help but make comparisons. So, I want to deal with the current situation first and then set it aside so we can focus on the text.

Like many of you, I had great interest in the proceedings of the Senate Judiciary Committee. I kept up with what was happening, reacting with anger, frustration, futility, disgust that political theatre was on full display, ruining the lives of good and decent people in the process as politicians and media elites sought to score political points. I have been left with an utter disgust for the process, ashamed of our leaders, appalled that such politicians and talking heads have been given the power to govern our lives. Something has to change! There, have I been clear enough to express my outrage, and yet vague enough to not take sides and thus continue the charade here among us? Enough! Let's turn our attention to the apostles and the book of Acts.

As you might remember, back in chapter 4, Peter and John were arrested and hauled before the highest Jewish authorities in the land. They were questioned, berated, and then released with the order to cease and desist from preaching or teaching in the name of Jesus. They said then that they were not going to obey that order. So, you knew this day was coming. And here in Acts 5 it comes. Follow along as I read this portion of the story, Acts 5:17-32. READ.

Main point: When God calls you to preach the gospel publicly, you do.

In other words, there are times when God calls you to civil disobedience. We have a higher allegiance than our allegiance to civil government, it is an allegiance to God. Hear again this powerful statement given by Peter on behalf of the disciples as

they stood before this pompous group of Jewish authorities, “We must obey God rather than men!” That is a strong statement. That is a line in the sand. There are consequences for such words. You could die for saying such things. And it seems clear to me that these early leaders were prepared to die rather than keep quiet. Indeed, after they were arrested and miraculously freed by God in the middle of the night, where did they go? While the Jewish authorities were gathering to decide their fate, sending guards to bring them out of jail, they were already out preaching again in the temple courts, perhaps the most visible place in Jerusalem, or shall we say, “right out the window on your left!”

Such is what happens to those who sense the call of God on them to speak up for Him. They will. . . with the power and help of God, under the threat of death from God’s enemies. But make no mistake, they WILL speak up! (2 parts)

I. God will make sure that His message gets out. vv.17-26

In this case, He performed some sort of miracle, a miracle that is repeated three times in the book of Acts: He causes the middle of the night release of His spokesmen. Here, it is the apostles, in ch.12 it is Peter, in ch.16 it is Paul. This three-fold repetition of the miraculous release of the apostles from jail gives us the sense that God will not allow man’s efforts to shut up His spokesmen to succeed. As He did with Shaq, Raq, and Benny in the fiery furnace, with Daniel in the lion’s den, with so many others in both Scripture and since, God will deliver His own so His mission can go forward. I don’t know about you, but this is very encouraging for me. I need to be reminded that God delivers His own. Man cannot stop the advancement of the Kingdom of God!

v.17- Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. [18](#) They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

We pick up the story right where we left off last week. Good things were happening among the believers. The people of the community held them in high

regard. But as we see here, the established powers hated them. And here we see why: they were jealous. Jealous of what? The crowds, the power, the growth trajectory of this upstart group. I remember having to deal with such jealousy in a previous ministry. Our church was growing at the same time as other churches were shrinking. And so, we were accused of stealing people from them. My response to them was simply that the people coming to us had long ago quit attaching themselves to them, and that if these people under question walked into their midst, they would not be welcomed. They were not “prominent people” in the community. They were outcasts who found a home among us. In part, even here at Hillcrest that is why we call ourselves the motley crew.

But these entrenched leaders were jealous, they were filled with jealousy. As you might suspect, jealousy is a powerful force. Jealous people are capable of and often do very disgusting things. They say and do things to destroy the ones they are jealous of. We must not underestimate the destructive capability of jealousy. Such is the case here. These religious leaders were ready to lock up and kill good men, simply because they were more successful than them. Watch out for jealous people!

19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 20 “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people the full message of this new life.”

The apostles are locked up, safely contained until the authorities could assemble to deal with them the next morning. But then this strange thing happened: God sent His special messenger to release them from jail. Notice this angel of the Lord led them to freedom. I think this follows a pattern seen elsewhere in Scripture. You might say God is in the business of setting captives free. It is in His DNA. Then He gives them instructions, telling them to stand in the most public space imaginable: the temple courts. The apostles went there because they were sent there by the angel of the Lord. They spoke the message He told them to speak, present the gospel, talk about this new life in Christ. He released them with purpose, to testify for Him.

The wording here emphasizes standing firm, taking a stand to proclaim and defend the faith. There was a mission they needed to complete, in the shadow of the place where the group was assembling to put them on trial. Can you see the irony in this? They were jailed because they were speaking out. God orchestrates their

miraculous release from captivity in the middle of the night...so they could go back to preaching in the exact same spot. In other words, God was not going to be stopped!

21 At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles.

Sure enough, as soon as it became light the next morning, the apostles went to their normal spot to do their normal thing: preach the good news. And God made it clear that this is precisely what He wanted them to do. But at the same time, in the same temple complex, in their fancy and official space, the established, entrenched leaders of the Jewish people gathered to determine what they were going to do with these renegade followers of Jesus. When they were finally ready, they sent for the prisoners to be brought before them. This is where the story gets funny.

22 But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, 23 “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” 24 On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. 25 Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people.”

I picture them marching into the jail, ordering the guards to open up the doors so they could drag the apostles out. They open the doors and...empty. There is no one there. There has been a great escape. But there is nothing about the scene that indicates an escape: no violence, no destruction, no busted doors or windows. The men simply weren't there. What a shock! You lock them in the room, sit outside the door, open up the door in the morning, and they are all gone without a trace.

So, they had to report back on their findings. I love the wording, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were “puzzled.” This didn't make sense. Where did they go???? All of a sudden, it is as if someone looks out the window and notices

the men outside doing what they always do: preaching! “Look! There they are!” In other words, it was not, “We found them.” It was, “There they are, right in front of us in plain view.” They were not hiding out, they had not tried to run, they just went back to their normal routine.

These human authorities had no power over them. In fact, their efforts were laughable. It was like trying to contain Samson with ropes. All of their intimidations, threats, jails, chains were worthless against these men. They had God on their side. You can be bold when you have God on your side. Amen?

26 At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

Now that they found them, they had to bring them in. But like I said, they didn't have to go far and they didn't have to use force. Just like Jesus, the disciples did not fight back. They went willingly. And the scene was also viewed by the people, oh the power of the people! The guards handled them delicately so as not to rile up the people. The guards feared for their lives. Notice their weapon of choice: stones. I am sure the guards had more powerful weapons than that. But ordinary people, armed with stones, defending the cause of God wield more power than guards with armor and knives and swords and spears. This whole passage plays on that theme, that ordinary people can defeat powerful foes...if God is with them.

As I suggested before, this passage gives me great courage. Yes, it is presented as a miracle, out of the ordinary, noteworthy for history. But it is not out of God's character. Indeed, it is consistent with His character. It is what He does all the time. He protects, releases, saves, sets captives free. In each and every generation, He calls His people to stand up for Him, preach the gospel, call people to follow Him, even if it makes others jealous. We should expect the backlash. It ought never surprise us. And, it will sometimes come with those you thought ought to be with us. These were their brothers and sisters, from the same peoples, tribes, and tongues. But the gospel going forward made the jealous, filled with jealousy, capable of doing anything, determined to stop it, and stop it right now! Would God let that happen? Of course not! What an encouraging text!

II. God sometimes calls us to civil disobedience out of our obedience to Him. vv. 27-32

There will be times when He calls us to take a stand, even a public stand. May the words of this text resonate within us, “We must obey God rather than men!”

27 Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

As is so often the case, the “questioning” here contains no questions, rather the high priest levels two accusations. First of all, they disobeyed the cease and desist order not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus. And the charge is that they have “filled Jerusalem” with their teaching. In other words, you not only continued to do it, you did it loudly, publicly, so everyone by now has heard you. In other words, you have flaunted your disobedience.

But to make matters even worse, you continue to blame us for this man’s death. So, who is “this man?” Clearly, it is Jesus. But notice that he refuses to say Jesus’ name. It is “your teaching” and “this man’s death.” The context makes it clear he is referring to Jesus, but he never says it. Can you imagine the disgust he must have harbored toward Jesus?

So, you kept on doing what we warned you not to do and you kept on blaming us for someone’s death. In other words, you are guilty. The case is closed.

29 Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

As is so often the case, Peter speaks for the whole. He defends them by declaring that they are acting out of an obedience to a higher authority: God Himself.

God is telling them to speak. Notice he brings up both the crucifixion and resurrection, giving credit to their mutual God for the miracle of the resurrection and blaming them for crucifying Jesus. He doesn't back down an inch. As the high priest, this questioner would claim to represent, to speak for God. And yet Peter claims it is this precise God who has displayed His power by raising Jesus from the dead. And once more, Peter blames these Jewish leaders (and their followers, see 2:23, 36) for killing Jesus. Are you seeing the irony? They are being accused of crimes against the Jewish people, and they respond by declaring THEM guilty of murder. Let me ask you, when you accuse the ruling authorities of murder, how does that usually turn out for you?

[31](#) God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. [32](#) We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

There they are, preaching the gospel! Again, are you seeing the irony of their civil disobedience? They are being accused of preaching the gospel and blaming the Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus. And so they respond to the accusations by...preaching the gospel and blaming the Jewish leaders for the death of Jesus. They didn't back down an inch. They basically confessed to the crime by committing it right in front of them. In other words, this is a “Convict us if you want, but we are not stopping” sort of situation.

Notice Peter's perspective. He offers the gospel to them, a gospel based on repentance and forgiveness. He claims his connection to them as Israel. In other words, he does not separate himself from them. He claims, not the role of authority like Jesus but is simply the witness. He is declaring what he has seen and heard. He is testifying, just as is the Holy Spirit. He is claiming no greater role for himself than is true for all believers. This is the beauty and simplicity of the gospel on display. We are not elitists, who claim something special about ourselves. We are just ordinary folks empowered by the Spirit of God with a message about the Son of God intended to change the lives of all who would believe. If you receive the message as we have received the message, you too will be thus empowered. He is not disrespectful, disobedient, insolent. He is simply, humbly, boldly preaching the truth.

This is civil disobedience at its finest. They didn't sneak around, they didn't skirt around the issue, they didn't equivocate or use coded language, or hide their identity. Instead, they simply affirmed the allegations by saying right in front of this whole assembly of Jewish leaders what they were accused of saying in the temple courts. They were obedient to God rather than to men. And, so they knew what that could mean for them. They could be imprisoned for life or put to death like their namesake. They stood firm in the face of the greatest of threats. These were real men of God!

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

1) We will stand firm when and where God calls us, even if it displeases the human authorities over us.

2) We will trust God to protect and deliver as He sees fit.

3) We will offer hope even to those who persecute us.

4) We will obey God rather than men!