

Before I embark on the Second Lesson for the morning I would like to say a little something about the context because the lectionary for the day gives us just a little too narrow a snapshot of this particular Act of the Apostles. A lot has happened since we were all gathered here last. Yes, opening day for the Braves and the Final Four, but I'm talking about in the life of the disciples. Last Sunday was Easter Sunday and we celebrated Jesus' resurrection but as we know, the story does not end there. Jesus overcoming death is not a spectacular 1<sup>st</sup> century magic trick where the audience "oohs" and "aahs," asks how he did it, marvels at the healed wounds, check out the *ehow* article on resurrection, and then move along. No, Jesus' resurrection was – no, I should say *IS* – for a purpose and the story goes on.

At the beginning of the book of Acts from which our second reading will come, Jesus tells the apostles that they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. So the disciples have begun this mission, this mission of witnessing to the resurrection, of telling the good news of Jesus Christ, and filling all of Jerusalem with his teachings. Incidentally, they are not very quiet or subtle with this mission. Peter is said to have given public addresses from the side porch of the Temple. Well, all this carrying on gets them in some trouble for the very same reasons their teacher and leader was arrested and publicly executed. Not to mention, thousands of people have been added to the number of believers. The actions of the Apostles are deemed threatening to the religious establishment of the day and so they are arrested, spend a night in jail, and then are taken before the Temple court. They are ordered to

refrain from speaking or teaching in Jesus' name at all. Peter tells the council directly, "Yeah, that's not gonna happen." But they are released anyway and they get right back to their mission of witnessing to the resurrection and healing people in Jerusalem. Peter and the apostles are promptly re-arrested and this time thrown into a public jail for the night. At some point in the middle of the night an angel shows up and breaks them out. So, what do they do? They go to the temple in the morning and the text says, "went on with their teaching." So, not all that surprising at this point, they get arrested for a third time. And this is where our reading for today begins: Acts 5: 27-32.

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.

**Bold.** Bold is a word that comes to mind when I hear the story of those first Christians. Those men and women were bold. It is no secret that Peter and the other apostles were a bit dim witted in much of the gospel narrative but now, with this mission of sharing the Good news, they really step up and do so boldly in the face of clear opposition. What is it about these teachings in the name of Jesus that are so threatening anyway? What is it about the disciples preaching that causes the authorities to want to shut them up?

Before I go any further I want to make something clear. Yes, these Sadducees and chief priests and human authorities, these are the folks who had Jesus killed, and yes, they represent the Jewish establishment of the day but this text is absolutely not an

indictment of Jews. This text has for too long been used to fuel anti-Semitism and this is 100% not the intent of this text. Jesus was Jewish, Peter was Jewish, and so were most of the disciples. In addition to that fact, the religious leaders did not act alone, it was the Romans who actually carried out the execution, it was the disciples who betrayed, abandoned, and denied him and it was the crowds, the very crowds that followed Jesus throughout his ministry that called for his death. The death of Jesus is an act of all humanity against God, not just the Jews. Likewise the resurrection is an act of God *for* all creation.

What is it that these disciples are preaching that provokes such fear and such violence? Well it is the simple gospel truth, as the apostles tell the court, “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus and exalted him that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins.” Jesus use to offer those around him the forgiveness of sins and this drove the religious authorities crazy. Here, before the court, Jesus’ disciples are offering the same thing. The religious leaders consider this blasphemy, only God can forgive sins and there is a process for that; it’s clearly written in black and white in the Bible. You go to the priest and offer a sacrifice to be forgiven. There is a system at work and that system is the law and the law provides order and more importantly for those in power it provides control. The teachings of Jesus disrupt that system by offering forgiveness of sins freely to those who need it and deserve it meaning everybody – all equally sinful and equally redeemed. Apparently, the brutal public execution of Jesus did not serve its purpose of intimidating and scattering his followers for very long. The resurrection of Jesus built boldness and confidence that this work of Jesus is the work of God. The actions of the apostles: teaching, healing, jail breaking with angelic accomplices, all affirm this fact.

The system of control, dominance, and oppression used by the Romans and the religious authorities is threatened, not just by the rabble-rousing rabbi Jesus, but also by his followers emboldened by the Holy Spirit. The system of control is being resisted and the tool of resistance is the offer of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, the offer of the opportunity to be a healed and united community. What is so threatening about that? What is so threatening to those in charge about being offered forgiveness for the injustice committed?

This past Thursday marked the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death. He knew a little something about what is threatening to those in charge and he knew about resistance. As a spokesman, as a drum major for justice and peace, King infused the civil rights movement with a very particular form of resistance, one which he discovered embedded in the pages of Scripture. He found in the words of the Hebrew prophets calling down oppressive leaders and apathetic elites a vision for a different way to be community. He found in the story of Jesus Christ an invitation for a broken and divided, segregated and desensitized community to become something more, to become more *human*. His belief and acts of nonviolent resistance mirrored aspects of the early Christian movement undertaken by these apostles. On April 16, 1963 he wrote a letter from the Birmingham jail, where he was being held as a prisoner, on this topic addressed to none other than his fellow clergymen. King had been arrested for his involvement in the Birmingham campaign, a series of boycotts, sit-ins, and marches aimed at calling attention to the unequal treatment of African-Americans. King's fellow clergymen in Birmingham issued a statement that his actions and the actions of the movement were "unwise and untimely." In this letter King put his finger right on the issue that Peter and

the apostles are bringing to light in their direct actions, in their repeated arrests, refusal to comply with the order to be silent, get into line, put an end to this unwise teaching in *this name*. King writes, “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.?... Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such a creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue.”<sup>1</sup> The negotiation civil rights leaders were after was one of equal rights and integration. The offer to those who sought to control through an oppressive system was repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the opportunity to be a healed and united community. What is so threatening about that? What is so threatening about some ordinary men and women who seek to obey God rather than any human authority?

What is somehow so threatening to us human beings is the will of God for us to be a diverse community all of us sinful yet all of us redeemed, living in a healed and united community. This pushes against our tendencies to control one another, to dominate, to grab more and get jealous of what others have. We saw these tendencies lived out in the Garden of Eden as Adam and Eve wanted more of what God had and as Cain killed his brother Able out of fear and jealousy. We have so deep within us a resistance to see the humanity in those whom we have made up our minds are different from us. Jesus’ life and ministry consistently forces those around him to look at each other as beloved and so threatening to human power structures is the invitation to live out the community of God on earth, he also took on the result of our fear and defiance. The apostles finally grasp this, at least in part. They boldly go to the heart of the power structure, to the feet of the oppressor and establish a creative tension in order to offer

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<sup>1</sup> “Letter From Birmingham Jail,”  
[http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated\\_letter\\_from\\_birmingham/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/resources/article/annotated_letter_from_birmingham/)

them something new, something better in the name of Jesus Christ: the opportunity to be a human rather than an oppressor, to let the image of God flourish rather than their fear and desire for power. In the negotiation that follows this creative tension, you can hear the boldness of accountability bound to the invitation for those holding them captive to be something else. You can hear it as the apostles remind them that they must all obey God. They share this mandate because this God is the God of all of their ancestors. They link them together, they remind them of their common bond – this God of the apostles is also the God of their captors. You can hear them remind the council of the humanity of *this man* whom they follow, “He has a name, it’s Jesus, and you had him killed by hanging him on a tree.” And here they are to tell the whole community in Jerusalem that they are forgiven. Now the real gift and the threat: the opportunity for Israel to repent and be forgiven. The threat from Jesus was that he offered to the world more than the priests were willing or able to offer: freedom, grace, liberated humanity. Now here, to the priests who killed their teacher for this very offer, the apostles offer once again repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins. “These ordinary, uneducated people (that’s what the apostles are called earlier in Acts) these peasants, our prisoners are here offering us the opportunity to repent and be forgiven by them?!? For What?!? It’s absurd!” In the verse immediately follow the passage I read it states “When they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them.” The invitation to step outside of this cycle of dominance and oppression and be something other, something better, a human being made in the image of God living in community with other human beings equally beloved by God is again too threatening and it must be stopped.

We too are called to tell what we have seen of Christ at work in Scripture, in our lives, in our community, and in communities around the world. We too live within the system Jesus and his apostles struggled to heal. Those systems are certainly evident in the drama that is international politics, but these systems that work to silence truth and stomp out resistance to oppression, they are also at work in our lives. They can emerge in our homes, our places of work, even in our selves. It is any system that seeks to silence the truth that you can be more than a victim, or that you are forgiven and can be more than an oppressor. This is the cycle Jesus' life, death, and resurrection has interrupted. Jesus, the ultimate victim is also Christ the ultimate conqueror of death and savior of creation. As Christ's disciples with Peter and the others we too may find ourselves called to establish creative tension in the name of Christ and his community of grace. But let me be the first to admit, we must keep in mind an uncomfortable truth, that because of our privileged status as the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the world, where 1 in 32 of our fellow citizens are currently in prison we may more often be the ones called to see the humanity in the other who has come to us to offer us an opportunity to repent, be forgiven, and become a healed and united community. The religious authorities questioning the apostles in their anger speak a profound truth, "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." Yes, they have filled the world with his teachings and are determined to bring the blood of Jesus, the blood which offers new life, blood that cleanses, blood that heals, blood that falls on all of us as the children of God. They are determined to extend that gift even to those responsible for Jesus' death. While the death of Jesus is an act of all humanity against God the resurrection is an act of God

all creation. That is what we come to this table to declare, this blood, the blood we are determined to bring to those in our community and beyond, this blood means we get to be something more, a healed and united community bound together through the Holy Spirit. This is the tie that binds our hearts, the blood of Jesus, and we are determined to share it with the world.