

It is no surprise that after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection there still remains great conflict between the religious and political establishments in Jerusalem and the followers of Jesus. In Acts, the religious establishment is represented mainly by the Sadducees, "the aristocratic temple priests," who are different from the Pharisees but often clumped together as opponents of Jesus. "In contrast to the Pharisees, the Sadducees do not believe in life after death or in angels and spirits" (*Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, Paul Achtemeier, p. 957). The Book of Acts takes place post-resurrection and is the story of the earliest Christian movement- the early church. And even though we've yet to celebrate Pentecost this year, the unleashing of the Holy Spirit has already taken place just a few chapters shy of today's story. Peter and the other apostles, with the help of the Holy Spirit, are the carriers of Easter truth- boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection to those who would listen. And wow did the people listen! Through the apostles' healing and teaching, we're told that the number of followers grew and grew (v. 14)- which of course drew the attention of the religious authorities. The #'s aren't the only thing that grew. The Sadducees and the high priests became very jealous of the apostles' success. A confrontation ensued and Peter and the apostles were arrested but then released, after being warned to stop speaking about these things. Peter and company returned to the temple and continued to teach about Jesus. Not surprisingly, Peter and the apostles are arrested again- this time though they were thrown in jail. But the jail couldn't hold the good news. In the middle of the night, an angel freed them from their cell and told them to return to the temple- once again-

to preach about Jesus. The captain and his guards go to the temple to bring Peter and company back in front of the council and they didn't use force because they were afraid the large group of people could turn violent and stone the guards (v.26). And that's where we pick up in today's story. Let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God found in the Book of Acts 5:27-32. **READ.**

Yeah, it's the same Peter. In today's story, Peter reports to the high priest and the council saying, "We were witnesses of such things" ("we" referring to the apostles and "such things" referring to Jesus' resurrection); however, last week in Luke's version of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday, I don't remember Peter nor the other male apostles being part of the "we" who were witnesses...at first. What I recall was that after the women had told the others that Jesus wasn't there...that he had been raised they dismissed the news as a bunch of hokey, except for Peter, who one could argue may have suffered from FOMO and ran to the tomb to see for himself. And all he found there was an abandoned linen cloth. Returning home, he wondered what had happened (Luke 24:12). Nevertheless, by the early days of the church as described in Acts, "Peter is among the boldest and most powerful witnesses to Jesus' message, death, and resurrection. I mean by the power of the Holy Spirit even his shadow offered healing (v. 15b). Clearly something happened. Peter had lost his chance to witness on Easter morning but thank God the story doesn't end there, for Peter or for us" (*Christian Century*, Sarah Dylan Breuer, 4.3.07).

What does it look like to be authentic, Christian witnesses as followers of the Risen Christ? I would argue that Peter and the other apostles offer an example here in today's story. They speak truth to power, which is always easier said than done. Refusing to be silenced the apostles talked back to and/or sassed the authorities who unjustly and unnecessarily brutalize and detain them" (Mitzi J. Smith, workingpreacher.org). Their civil disobedience was rooted in their Christian faith. What Peter is preaching to the council though is not vengeance, but just mercy...not vengeance but the gospel. Paul and the apostles' bold witness echoes in my mind: "We must obey God rather than humans" (v. 29)! How do we witness and stand with our neighbors and not become a tool of the powers of this world? "When we stand up to such powers in what we claim is faithful opposition, how do we know that we aren't simply projecting our own desires, prejudices, and politics onto God, when in fact we are simply serving ourselves? [We definitely can continue reading scripture and pray for the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and guidance.] And perhaps Peter's reference in verse 30 to God raising Jesus is key here. What God promises and accomplishes is life rather than death, freedom rather than confinement, justice rather than injustice, repentance and forgiveness rather than murder and revenge. That is the kingdom to which the church is still called to bear witness in words and actions" (Peterson). Things that are "of God" are things that make you stop in your tracks, catching a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

Mallory McMorrow, a Michigan State Senator, spoke truth to power this past week when she addressed a colleague for bullying her and others with hate speech. While it is nothing new to have sparring and spewing going on between political parties, what caught my attention were these words from a journalist (John Stoehr, *The Editorial Board*). “While there was a lot to admire in McMorrow’s speech, for me, though, the salient feature was her vision of Christianity. It strives to elevate love and community over sin and punishment. Jesus tells us: ‘No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.’ Yep, that’s along the same lines as we must obey God and not humans. There is no substitute for the faithful proclamation of the word. One of the things McMorrow, a follower of Jesus, said was, “We can’t lose if we stand up against hate. There has to be a way to talk to constituents about issues as well as not be afraid to shut down hate.”

Again, Peter’s scathing criticism of the officials is a reflection of the conflict between the apostles and the elite in Jerusalem. The apostles spoke words of forgiveness, and they also named the injustice they had witnessed in Jesus’ execution. We are called to look for those voices among us that have been muffled, if not silenced and lift them up. We are called to name difficult realities, which offer an even deeper love of neighbor. Unfortunately, in Peter accusing some of the Jewish elite of killing Jesus, it has been wrongly interpreted by some Christians in ways that have

perpetuated anti-Semitism and unlawful acts of hate crimes- still to this day, even after the unspeakable tragedy of Holocaust.

Again, settled authority- whether state or religion- is not eager for restless transformation, as they have a deep interest in keeping things as they are- status quo- even if the system is broken. In contrast, the church, powered by the passion of the risen Christ and led by the Spirit, is portrayed as bold and daring in its enactment of a healed world (Brueggemann). Just as the Roman empire turned a blind eye to the needs of the disadvantaged, the apostles brought them healing. And just as the empire fostered an ethos of hoarding and acquiring wealth at the expense of the poorest, the Jesus movement promoted an alternative worldview in sharing their possessions” (Raj Nadella, workingpreacher.org).

Following God is still a risky business today. Learning how to obey God rather than human authority may demand a hard look at the witness of Christians at the margins as well as reading and interpreting scripture together through the power of the Holy Spirit. Being resurrection people “requires us, along with the Holy Spirit, to be agents of reversal. We are witnesses by embodying good news to the poor, imprisoned, and those oppressed because of their religious affiliation, culture, gender, race, class, or sexual orientation. The religious entities, authorities, or communities to whom we submit do not always side with the oppressed or with justice” (Smith).

Some of you know about and may have even been involved with Greenville's new, interfaith justice ministry temporarily named "Greenville County Interfaith Justice Network." Based on the model of Nehemiah 5 when Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall around the city. During the rebuilding, there is a drought and the workers cry out that they were forced to take out loans to buy food and pay taxes. The drought continues and the lenders took everything: their fields, vineyards, even forced some of them to sell their children into slavery. Nehemiah was so angry that he organized a great assembly of people and brought forth the money lenders to be held accountable. During the meeting, the money lenders agreed to restore everything they had taken from the people. Hence the reason the justice network calls the assemblies they hold once a year: Nehemiah actions. There is one goal with this local network: to make the Greenville area more just. We are culturally, economically, geographically, and religiously, diverse. We will meet together in small groups to discuss what makes us angry in our community or keeps us up at night and then we will vote on one issue to address in the coming year. There are already sister justice networks in Columbia and in Charleston, not to mention all over the US. For example, at the Nehemiah Action in April of 2018 addressing the issue of affordable housing, with 1600 Charleston members gathered, the justice network gained commitments from County and City officials to adopt a housing trust fund with an annual dedicated source of funding in the amount of 30 million dollars. With God's help, it happened! Together, we speak with one powerful voice for justice for our community. This unique approach transforms systems that cause suffering by

encouraging local officials to use best practices and holding them accountable when they do not. There will be more information coming late this summer on how you can get involved both individually and as parishioners of Triune, and I hope you'll join us in the pursuit of justice in this community.

Isn't it interesting that the temple police did not violently arrest the apostles due to their fear of the mass protesters? "If it were not for the willingness of the people, the masses, to disrupt injustice, to protest, the apostles would have been the fatal victims of police brutality" (Mitzi J. Smith, workingpreacher.org). As resurrection people, "we can believe that new life is possible when seemingly all hope is lost...we can see and act on injustice: issues tearing our communities apart or leaving some with excess while others do not have enough. We can question the sources of power and authority in our world to bring justice to our community. This is often difficult work because we must live in a countercultural way, just as Peter and the other apostles did. We sometimes have to stand up when others tell us to sit down and speak up when others tell us to stop preaching. As we celebrate the resurrection, the promise of a savior fulfilled, let us continue, with God's help, to live as Easter people...people who DO resurrection living- and as preacher and GA Congressman John Lewis said many times, "Let's get into some trouble...some good trouble!" Amen.