



Handout for week of 4/29/19 Jn. 21: 1-19 & Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41

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Acts 5: 27 When they had brought them in to face the Sanhedrin, the high priest demanded an explanation. 28 'We gave you a strong warning', he said, 'not to preach in this name, and what have you done? You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and seem determined to fix the guilt for this man's death on us.' 29 In reply Peter and the apostles said, 'Obedience to God comes before obedience to men; 30 it was the God of our ancestors who raised up Jesus, whom you executed by hanging on a tree. 31 By his own right hand God has now raised him up to be leader and Savior, to give repentance and forgiveness of sins through him to Israel. 32 We are witnesses to this, we and the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.' (33-40 omitted) 41 And so they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, glad to have had the honor of suffering humiliation for the sake of the name. 42 Every day they went on ceaselessly teaching and proclaiming the good news of Christ Jesus, both in the temple and in private houses.

COMMETARY:

This portion of Acts 5 is tucked into stories of miracles, struggles, and closes with Gamaliel counseling the temple leadership to take wait and see position regarding the new faith community and the disciples.

The high priest saw a fire starting and wanted to get it under control. Burying Jesus seemed like the best solution. If he were done with Jesus, then he would be done with civil unrest, and done with excited crowds. If he were done with Jesus, he could get back to the story of his life the way it was originally written -- with the high priest as the central religious figure, the true keeper of God. After all, he had a demanding job. Besides managing the temple, he had Rome to consider. The whole Jesus flap created the kind of disturbance that might bother the emperor.

Disappointingly, the death of Jesus only yielded three days of calm before the disciples came out of hiding claiming that he was raised to new life. By Pentecost the flames were beginning to roar. As the high priest's frustration escalated, so did his attempts to deter Jesus' disciples from teaching, healing and preaching.

The disciples gave the high priest a headache, especially the one named Peter. He already had been detained once, but when the council of elders listened to his appeal they could find no reason to keep detaining him. The high priest seemed determined not to make that mistake again. This time he jailed Peter and his comrades straight away No Miranda. No "one phone call." But no need for them either, as the prison locks were not an effective barrier to the Holy Spirit. Before daylight Peter had returned to the scene of his crime and picked up where he had left off teaching. Until the police found him he was free to tell the story a few more times to a few more people. He would not be found in hiding. The whole point of being free was being free to do ministry.

The passage presents a striking contrast between the disposition and mission of the high priest and that of Peter. Throughout, the priest is beset with anger and fear over his mission of shutting Peter down. But not Peter, who is focused on the dissemination of the gospel -- a mission that affords him a joyful and resilient attitude.

The high priest's questioning of Peter was to the point. Why have you defied my express directive to desist this witnessing? There was a time when Peter might have thought that a reasonable question. There was a time when Peter thought the Holy Spirit could be managed if human beings were just properly instructed in matters of authority and restraint. Right after experiencing the transfiguration, he and companions James and John had spoken sternly to a man who was casting out demons in Jesus' name. They reasoned that the man was not on the official roster of disciples. They even reported the incident to Jesus as if they had done a good thing (Luke 9:49-50).

But that was before: before Jesus' crucifixion, before Peter's own denial, before Peter saw the risen Christ, before the church received the gift of the Spirit. At this point, when the high priest forbids Peter to witness, he might as well have been forbidding Peter to breathe.

Peter's answer makes clear that from his perspective the role the high priest plays is not that of authority but of executioner. The council is enraged to the point of wanting to silence Peter forever, as they thought they had silenced Jesus. They are politicians who fear a loss of power and credibility, as well as repercussions from Rome. They are the officials of faith, and do not take kindly to being upstaged in the realm of religion.