

## Acts 5:27-42

<sup>27</sup> When the temple police had brought the apostles, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> 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.” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

<sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> Then he said to them, “Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> 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. <sup>38</sup> 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; <sup>39</sup> 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!”

They were convinced by him, <sup>40</sup> and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. <sup>42</sup> And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

### Trinity Presbyterian Church

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#### “Discerning the Wind”

There the committee sat: all circled around the table in disagreement...again. It was their third meeting in attempt seek a resolution. The first time they met someone stormed out of the meeting slamming the door behind them. The second time, blame got tossed on each other’s laps like they were playing a game of Hot Potato. Needless to say the third meeting wasn’t going much better. The tension was thick in the room and growing thicker, like a heavy fog you couldn’t see through. Then someone had a brilliant idea: “Why don’t we pray” they said. So the room got quiet as they all closed their eyes. The prayer was brutally honest: “Dear God, we have sought our own desire and not yours. We have shouted and blamed and reacted out of anxiety. To be honest, God, we have not even asked what you have wanted and we have not acted as though you are right here with us. We are sorry and we are listening. Amen.” It is a prayer for discernment. A prayer that lifted the fog. Like Gamaliel did for the church council

after the high priest wanted to stone the disciples and squash the early church. Rather than playing the role of judge, Gamaliel talks sense into the council by wondering out loud, “What is God up to?” His voice is the voice of discernment.

Imagine if discernment was a tangible object we could carry around with us—maybe keep it in our back pockets like our cellphones. There we are in a conversation with a church member about the church when they start talking gossip. “Can you believe so-and-so?” The temptation of mouth-watering gossip has been known to lure us in from time to time. But what would it mean if we pulled discernment out of our pockets and listened to what it has to say first? Or what if the phone rings and it is someone asking us if we would be interested in being a part of some meaningful project. So we open our calendar seeing a lot of ink staring back at us on the page. We are so busy, but we know this could be a great opportunity and truthfully it makes us feel needed. We don’t know what to do, but then we remember that discernment is with us. So we ask the inquiring party to “hold on” as we reach into our pockets and listen to what discernment has to say. This year the session is reading a book on discernment. At one of the meetings a question from the book was raised, “Have you ever made a decision just to get the meeting over with?” We all laughed because we’ve done it. But, we might wonder, what would happen if we pulled discernment out of our back pocket and placed it in the middle of the room so we could all listen to what discernment had to say?

The dilemma, of course, is how are we to know for sure what is of God? Admittedly, God is annoyingly quiet. So chances are we go looking for a divine sign from somewhere else: a street sign pointing us in the right direction, a formation in the clouds, maybe we even crack open a fortune cookie for a clue or an answer. And not to say that God can’t work through signs or clouds or even Chinese proverbs, but knowing what God desires for us is rarely so easy. Once saw a simple weather vane perched on top of a roof. There it was: north, south, east and west. The arrow spinning underneath the proud rooster trying to catch the direction of the breeze. What was interesting wasn’t what the wind vane looked like, but where it was located. Not atop a barn or even on someone’s house. Instead, it was spinning on top of a church. We have to admit it would be quite wonderful if we had some sort of weather vane on top of our church buildings telling us which direction God wants us to go when the wind changes. Except, instead of clear directions, God gives us committees, sessions, and pastors to take on the task of navigating the wind. No wonder our decisions end up taking forever! Sure, we can go scrolling through scripture, but even there we can get mixed messages. Clear cut signs rarely drop from the sky. And God? Well, God is bashfully silent. So how do we know for sure what direction is of God?

Perhaps we don’t know. But we listen to Gamaliel. Remember what he says? Hold on, don’t decide quite yet. Wait. Watch. Listen. It is what we tell our children to do before they

cross the street. Wait, watch, listen. If it is of God—if what is happening is part of God's next move—let it be. Actually, we aren't going to be able to stop it. It would be like trying to stop a tornado. Who among us would be so foolish? And if it is not of God it won't last. You know, Gamaliel's words were used a couple years ago when our denomination was discerning whether to ordain gays and lesbians. If it is of God, they said, we aren't going to be able to stop it. So far it has lasted and we pray it continues. Then, on the other hand, we have heard from some vociferous religious voices which claim that the election back in November was the will of God. While some of us might roll our eyes, perhaps we use Gamaliel's advice: wait, watch, listen. See if it lasts or if it fizzles out.

You see, the point isn't that we disengage from an issue we are passionate about. No! The point is we engage the issue from a place of discernment. The point is not that we stop doing our work in the community. The point is the work we are doing isn't ours to begin with! It's God's work that we keep discerning how we participate in it.

So notice what happens? We might move in a direction, but the successes and failures and all the anxieties which comes with our work is not totally ours to bear. Actually, the heavy lifting is on God's shoulders. It's why even after the council commands the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus, they can't do it—even after they are thrown in prison and beaten and forced into submission. Why? Because they are so caught up in what God is doing, and their entire lives are so overblown with good news, that they can't stop talking about it even if they wanted to.

God is going to do what God does. Our job is to keep discerning the direction, knowing Jesus is sitting right there in the middle of the room with us. If it is of God it cannot be stopped. It would be like trying to push back against a mighty wind. And truly, who among us would be so foolish?