

The Good News is Sprung and Crossing the Line

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.”

Imagine the courtroom scene. Peter and John appear before the judge for the second time in two days. The day before they were in the temple teaching without a license, healing without permits. The temple police charged them with disturbing the peace, so they spent the night in the slammer. Except an angel sprung them. And rather than skipping town, they head back to the same temple to teach and heal some more. So here they are on trial again before a frustrated judge who sees Peter and John as criminals who keep showing up in his courtroom. He says, “I’ve warned you not to cross the line. We’ve warned you to obey our strict orders! What do you have to say for yourselves?” They respond: “We must obey God rather than human authority.”

At the outset, it sounds right, doesn’t it? As the church we say we are about obeying God and not human authority. It’s what the UCC church in Greensboro said when they became a sanctuary place for Minerva Garcia and her family when I.C.E. was threatening to deport her. They said we must obey God and not human authority. When the bathroom bill tried to get passed to harass transgender folk, we just happened to make most of our bathrooms gender neutral. Why? Because we obey God and not human authority. It sounds right, doesn’t it? At the same time, however, dig a bit deeper and it is the same argument used for those who picket sign planned parenthood clinics; or even how religious extremists justify suicide bombings: “We must obey God,” they say. At first, it sounds right, doesn’t it? But dig a little deeper and it isn’t always so clear.

When we turn to the story, Peter and John say the same thing. They are on trial for preaching the good news. Nothing seems to be able to intimidate them. Not the law; not a little jail time. The disciples are far too God-intoxicated to be astronomically intimidated. So they keep preaching that although the powers colluded to silence Jesus and his message, God raised him up as a big fat “No!” to the most powerful empire on earth. Jesus is alive! It’s good news! Who would want to suffocate the good news?

Because he lives, the lives of those who have been discarded by the system matter.

Because he lives, there is healthcare for everyone and not just for those who can afford it.

Because he lives, cancer does not get the final word. Neither does an assault rifle in a nightclub, or a church, or on a college campus.

Because he lives the message Jesus preached that God’s kingdom is here is true!

Peter and James are on trial for spreading the good news. We might wonder: who would want to contain it?

Well, here comes the surprise: The people who are trying to squash the message is the church! Why in the world would the church want to squash the good news? You know, a thought occurred to me the other day. You see, I have never gotten arrested for preaching a sermon. Some may have disagreed and perhaps there has been a guest or two who didn't come back because of something I said. But I've never gotten put in jail for preaching. You see, part of me wonders if sometimes we pastors have gotten too comfortable with the status quo. We've become creatures of the system, and, the truth is, we just don't want the trouble.

If we were really about God's good news in the 60's our churches would've stood with Dr. King. But most of the white preachers considering their white churches told him to tone his message down so it didn't make others uncomfortable. They asked him to wait and trust the system. Basically, they suggested he accommodate to racism. The truth is, they didn't want the trouble. If we are honest, we still don't. I was at a meeting once where someone suggested that we write a statement addressing all the blatant lies that are being spread about immigrants, Muslims, refugees, others. They suggested that we have a moment at our presbytery meeting where people would be invited to stand up as an act of silent resistance against those who are in power spreading these lies. It was debated and eventually concluded that some might interpret our standing as a political gesture. Pastors said they did not want people who didn't stand to feel alienated. In the name of upholding a false sense of "peace and unity," we once again chose the side of power. We've done it so many times, the church's legs atrophied when it comes to standing up. All because we don't want the trouble. So we domesticate Jesus' message. We neutralize our pulpits. We preach good news that rings with mediocrity. It is a surprise. In the story it's the church who tries to contain the good news.

But here's the thing: Easter's news can't be boxed up! Not by a tomb, or a jail cell, or even the church! God will always find a way! Maybe you heard about the young man who in West Virginia chained himself to a pipeline? He said he did it because the fossil fuel industry has ruined our earth and enough is enough. He was arrested, jailed; but wonder: was he obeying God? Or how about the group of teenagers in Omaha, Nebraska who were about to be confirmed in the Methodist church last week. They stood before their own congregation, presenting a written statement of civil disobedience. They said that they could not join the church until it openly affirms all of God's children. The good news is sprung. Now tell me, were they obeying God rather than human authority? Easter's news is sprung from the tomb, from the jail cell, even from the church and the truth is, God will always find a way.

So Trinity's saintly rabble-rousers and holy Easter misfits: your leaders on the Session have made some decisions lately that may be perceived as "crossing the line." They voted to hang a banner outside that says Black Lives Matter. There might be some ruckus with that action. Also, once a quarter, the Session is meeting with the transgender support group that meets here. As lawmakers continue to attack their personhood, we as their allies say, "No! We must obey God." And it might lead us to crossing the line sometimes. Because we know: the church, at some point, must stand firm against lies that demean. We must speak truth to power. We must make room at our tables for the outsider. We must answer when peace and justice calls for us. We must love wider. We must trust deeper. We must grow to be okay with having uncomfortable conversations. We must grow through our discomfort. We must overcome our tendency toward silence. We must preach good news that is fierce and bold and actually good. And we must be

willing to make a holy-ruckus-of-faithful-gospel-resistance against the forces who dare to challenge the ways of God. Even if it gets us into trouble sometimes. Even if they tell us we are crossing the line!

Be encouraged. Peter and John are in trouble, too. Know the same Spirit who sprung them, is here, springing good news through us. Christ is alive! The tomb is empty! The prison doors are flung open! The good news cannot be contained! Amen! Amen!! And one more time for the Holy Ghost: Amen!!!