

April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022

## Acts 5:27-42 “Another Good Pharisee”

Easter isn't over. In the same way that Christmas isn't over until 12 days after Christmas, Easter isn't over until June 5<sup>th</sup> when we celebrate Pentecost over at Wildwood Park. That gives us six more Sundays to say, “He is risen!” (He is risen indeed.) Of course, this isn't the only time of year where we get to say that. We declare this in our words and actions throughout the year because we are a people of the resurrection. So welcome to the second Sunday in Eastertide. Are you a little tired of being in Luke's gospel for almost all of Lent and Easter? Well as of today, we are no longer in the gospel of Luke. But we are going to be in the other New Testament book that Luke wrote which is ...? Acts. When I was a kid in Eldora Flick's Vacation Bible School and we memorized the books of the bible, I thought it was the book of “axe” like you'd use to chop wood. But when I saw it in writing, I realized it was “acts.” We were told that the book was called Acts because it was all about the acts of the 12 apostles who were a part of Jesus' inner circle. I later learned that the Latin New Testament which was used in the church for centuries was where the book got its name: Praxis Apostle – or the practice or customs of the apostles. Later, I had a professor who said the book should have been called, “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” because that is what literally set the fire within the apostles to proclaim the good news of Jesus wherever they went.

Now before we get too far into Acts, I need to tell you how I'm breaking tradition today. Traditionally the Sunday after Easter is all about Thomas, the apostle who didn't get to see the resurrected Christ with the rest of the disciples. He was out maybe running errands or something. The Bible isn't clear. But when he returned, he didn't believe the other disciples when they told him they saw Jesus and Thomas insisted that he wasn't going to believe unless he saw Jesus himself. Then Jesus appears to the disciples again when Thomas was with them and there's this whole exchange between Jesus and Thomas where he gets to see Jesus' scars and proclaims his belief. Then the preacher has to come up with

yet another sermon either shaming Thomas for his doubt or making excuses for him because we all doubt. I'm done with that. My "making excuses for Thomas" well has run dry. I don't want to dwell in the "shoulda-couldas" of that story. I want to jump in and see what the apostles are doing to fulfill their teacher's commission to proclaim the gospel. I want to see them facing the same obstacles that Jesus had to deal with. I want to see them get their hands dirty.

This week's scripture delivers in that department. In fact, before we jump into what this scripture is all about, we've got to look at what these apostles were up to right before this incident with the Jewish High Council. First of all, you don't get brought before the Jewish High Council for minor religious offenses. You don't get brought in for standing on the street corner holding a "Jesus is awesome" sign. Peter and the apostles were on this Holy Spirit-driven rampage of healing, teaching, and bringing people to faith. They hadn't even stepped outside the walls of Jerusalem yet since Jesus died. People from towns outside the city were bringing people into Jerusalem to be healed. They were bringing them in on cots and mats and every day more and more people were added to their numbers. It had become quite the spectacle. So the high priest of the temple had the apostles arrested and put in jail. That didn't last very long though. Luke wrote that an angel came in the middle of the night, busted them out of jail and told them to go right back to the temple and keep on preaching, teaching and healing. When the guards discovered the empty jail cells, the temple police were sent out to bring them back to the high council. But the police had to be careful about how they proceeded because they were afraid what the crowds would do to them if they used excessive force. This gives you an idea of how many loyal followers the apostles had. This movement was getting out of hand as far as the high council was concerned.

That's where we are this week. The apostles are in front of the Jewish High Council and the high priest is *mad*. He said, "What? We told you all to quit teaching this Jesus stuff, but here you are again. You are determined to blame us for his death and put his blood on our hands. We

are not going to allow this disrespect to continue!” Then Peter said, “Well, you are the ones who conspired with the Romans to have him killed, so yeah. Plus, we’ve got to obey God, so we’re going to keep proclaiming the story of Jesus ... we’re going to keep preaching and teaching and healing because we have to.” Peter stood his ground and made his point clear – “We must obey God not you. You all did your thing. You did what you thought was politically advantageous, but God has other plans. Jesus is the one who is exalted. Jesus is the one who will teach Israel how to live freely and joyfully. Jesus is the one who sets the example by living God’s priority. And God’s priority is love. God’s priority is always love.” Now remember that phrase. There will be a quiz later.

That message was too much for the council to take and Luke writes, “When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.” But guess who stepped up to the plate to defend them? Gamaliel. Who was Gamaliel? He was a Pharisee. What? You mean like, “I don’t want to be a Pharisee ‘cause a Pharisee ain’t fair you see” like that awful goat song you taught us last month? Yes. A Pharisee. And not just any old Pharisee either. He was a Pharisee who was on the Jewish High Council. Please remember that in the gospels the word “Pharisee” is *not* synonymous with “bad guy” or “enemy of Jesus.” The Pharisees were a Jewish social movement ... a school of thought that started around 167 BC. It’s Rabbinic Judaism plain and simple and it was the most common form of Judaism back then and here today. Did they have their issues back then? Yes they did. Their strict observance of traditional and written law made it hard for them to get their heads wrapped around God’s radical mercy, grace and love. To make matters worse, many of their leaders got too friendly with the Roman political leaders and we all know what happens when religious leaders who have a hard time with mercy, love and grace get too cozy with corrupt political leaders ... don’t we? We sometimes forget that there were Pharisees among Jesus’ followers. The Pharisees were not always the bad guys. Some were, but not all of them. As my old clergy mentor Jack Musick used to say,

“Don’t judge a team by its best player but don’t judge them by their worst player either.” Gamaliel was one of the good players.

He excused the apostles and addressed the council. Remember, he was “a teacher of the law respected by all the people.” He said, “We’ve seen examples of wanna-be messiahs who became popular with the crowds but we’ve easily managed to put them and their followers out of commission. I’m telling you, these guys are the real deal. Now if what they are doing is just another human-made movement, they will fail. But if they’re legit? If they’ve got God on their side, then the last thing we want to do is try to put them down because *we will fail*.” So the council decided to have the apostles flogged and let them go. How did the apostles take this? “Woo-hoo! We got flogged by the Jewish High Council! Isn’t it great to know that we were judged worthy of suffering dishonor for the sake of Jesus’ name?” It’s funny how we Christians get more excited about who doesn’t like us than we do about people who do like us. I remember when First Christian Church in Lynchburg, Virginia was picketed by the Westboro Baptist Church. If you don’t know about them, they’re the church that holds protests at funerals for LGBTQ people and members of the military. When they came to protest outside our church we were all like, “Look at all those picketers! We must be doing something right!” Why were the apostles happy? Because they were punished by a council of religious leaders who had become lost. Their priority was a moral code that rose from their overly-strict observance of the Law. The apostles followed a moral code that rose from God’s priority of love as shown through the life and example of Jesus.

I have a problem when someone says, “You need to get your priorities straight.” First of all, when we use the word “priority” in the plural we’re showing the world that we don’t even know what the word means. Making priority into a plural is an oxymoron. It cancels itself out. If there is more than one priority, then none of them are the priority. I admit, there are a lot of things that are important, especially when it comes to our faith and practice. But if we can’t determine what is the

*most* important thing in any given situation, we're going to have a heck of a time determining how to conduct ourselves. For the apostles obeying God is the priority. Preaching God's good news is the one thing God called them to do. Everything else has to emerge from that priority. The apostles had filled Jerusalem with God's good news. Why? Because spreading the good news of Jesus is the loving thing to do. It multiplies God's love. And what is God's priority? God's priority is always love. If sharing God's love is not *our* priority, then we have to ask ourselves, "What are we even doing here?" And in many situations, we can't answer that question. So the disciples were filling Jerusalem with God's good news and they were not going to stop. Hallelujah! The question that this passage proposes is, "Have I filled the people I encounter from day to day with God's good news? Have I been the expression of divine and Holy love in their lives? Have I filled my neighborhood, my city, my world with God's love? Is living God's love my priority? God's loving mercy must be the one thing that directs all my work and my actions.

I believe Gamaliel recognized God's priority of love in the apostles. I believe that he was wise enough to know when something was from God and when it was not. I'd like to think that he recognized that his priority had always been upholding the law at the expense of demonstrating God's love and grace. But I can't say for sure. Maybe I'm ascribing a feeling to him that really isn't there because the scripture isn't 100% clear about his motives. But my hope is that he recognized the apostles' sincerity and courage to live God's priority even at the expense of their own lives. May we as the inheritors of the apostle's ministry and mission demonstrate God's priority of love in all that we say and do.