

sermon-4/11/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Stupid or Fearless?”
Acts 5:12-42

Something obviously happened to Peter and the other disciples. Right after Jesus’ crucifixion we see them hiding and fearful. They are afraid of Rome. They are afraid of the Temple power structure who arrested Jesus and handed him over to Rome. But, here we find them boldly proclaiming the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. They simply ignore the threats they receive from the Sadducees and the high priest.

Remember these authorities could have the disciples tortured. In fact, we read that is exactly what happened to the disciples at the end of our passage for today. They were flogged. The word “flogged” hardly captures what they endured. It usually entailed 39 lashes, which was almost enough to kill a person. It is what happened to Jesus before his crucifixion.

But not even being flogged stopped these disciples. What made them so fearless? I asked that of the lectionary class this past week. People were coming up with some ideas and then one member of the class said, “Stupidity!” We all immediately broke into laughter.

Obviously it was said somewhat tongue in cheek, but, when you think about it, stupidity certainly has to be considered. Why would anyone risk being flogged for preaching in public and saying bad things about those in authority. Most of us would be intimidated if we were told to shut up or pay the consequences.

If it wasn’t stupidity, then what was it that made them so fearless? It was most likely a combination of several factors. Perhaps it was because they had their priorities clearly set. Peter put it this way, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” That is exactly what the confessing Christians said to the Nazis in Germany during World War II. And many of them paid for it with their lives.

If one truly has his or her priorities straight, it gives them the ability to act boldly. Being clear about one’s purpose has tremendous power. We say when we baptize anyone, but especially children, we will teach them to put God first in any decision they make. If our government goes against what God would have us do, then we will sadly, but boldly go against our own government.

We have seen this countless times in countless ways down through history. Christians have courageously taken stands against the powers that be in their faithfulness to God’s call. Often it resulted in their being punished, and even killed. Having a firm set of priorities is very helpful in making one fearless.

Perhaps these early disciples were fearless because they could see that when they preached the good news to the people, God was obviously with them. They knew this

because people were being healed. They knew this because many were being drawn to their words of hope and grace.

Obviously being popular is no guarantee that one is being faithful to God or that God is blessing one's efforts. But, it was clear to Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, that these early disciples were not fooling themselves. They were not being blinded by their own popularity. They did not make being a follower of Jesus look easy or advantageous to those who chose to follow. Still, people came and people were healed.

Maybe if they truly believed God was with them, blessing their work, using them to heal, that gave them a deep sense of God's presence. It was that presence that made them fearless, knowing come what may, God would not abandon them.

Those are two good possibilities. I think the biggest reason they were fearless, however, was their resurrection faith. They truly believed God's purposes could not be thwarted. Nothing, not even death, could defeat God or God's people.

The Easter story we looked at last week helps us see the power of resurrection faith. The religious authorities thought they could control Jesus. They thought they could nail him down on the cross. Certainly they could put an end to his influence by killing him and then encasing him in the tomb. But God had the last laugh. The resurrection was God's joke against all those forces that opposed God and God's Christ. That is what Holy Humor Sunday is all about: God's great joke on any evil force that would oppose God.

This story in Acts is a repeat, in many ways, of the Easter story. The authorities thought they could intimidate the disciples into silence. When that didn't work, they thought they could nail them down, so to speak, like Jesus, by putting them in jail.

But, once again, God has the last laugh. An angel of the Lord let's them out. When the authorities go to retrieve them, the jail cell, like the tomb, was empty. It really is quite a funny story. Where did they go? Then someone arrives and says, "Hey, the guys you put in jail, I just saw them preaching in the temple."

Look who is frightened now. The captain and the temple police go to get Peter and the others, and it is they who are frightened, not the disciples. Once again resurrection faith always seems to turn things upside down. So when the disciples are tortured, even that does not work. They leave praising God they were allowed to suffer for Jesus' name.

Nothing disarms those in power like humor. Those who want to intimidate others hate to be laughed at. God, in essence, was laughing at those who tried to be in control, killing God's Christ, and now trying to shut up Christ's disciples. This is Holy Humor. It is powerful. It is freeing. This is a good day to celebrate.

In closing I'd like to read a poem by Wendell Berry. It speaks to the power of resurrection. It is also refreshingly funny. It is called: "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front." (Read poem) Amen

