



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – 2ND EASTER
ACTS 5:29-41 & I PETER 1:3-9
APRIL 16, 2023

“IF THIS IS OF GOD”

In John 17, just shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed for his disciples. He asked his Father to “*sanctify them by the truth – your word is truth.*” He prayed that his followers “would be one” – unified yet set apart from the world by that word. When he appeared three days later to them, he said “*as the Father has sent me so I send you*”, which must have been pretty jarring given the events of the previous few days. It was as though he said, “*see what they did to me... go in my name and they will do likewise to you.*” This may well explain why Jesus repeatedly spoke peace to them.

The amazing thing is they went! “We must obey God rather than men” Peter said. In our lesson today from Acts, we are party to what happens when Christians do that – they are ordered to stop speaking publicly about Jesus - least of all that “*the God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead.*” In the first century to a Jewish audience this sort of thing was objected to because if Jesus was that, then God had appeared in the form of a man- it implied, as Paul later pointedly affirmed, “in Jesus the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” That wouldn’t do to the people Peter was preaching to.

But what does this mean for us? Few people in this room today were raised with the assumption 1st century Jews were raised in - that God could not be in two places at the same time – you just assume based on your upbringing that God could be God even while also human. There was a time in our country when those who called themselves unbelievers or atheists – who claimed no belief in anything supernatural by whatever name or whatever form the supernatural came in, were more or less content to let religious people alone. They may have labeled our beliefs irrational, dishonest, unscientific, even kooky. But they left it at that.

Today those who confess the existence of God, and by implication the moral order of the universe such a belief in God necessarily compels a person to live under, are not left alone. We are editorialized about, shouted at, boycotted, fired, expelled, threatened with or denied appointments or advancement in business, academia and government – unless of course we stop speaking (and living) in the name of Jesus Christ. No longer just silly or outdated, biblically invoked belief and action is now considered hostile, oppressive, and evil.

But while these unpleasant realities are jarring, they are not new – Jesus told his followers to expect it. *They will hate you because they have hated me*, is how he said it in John 17. Each week in our liturgy we say, “*let us confess the faith of the church, the faith in which we baptize*” and then proceed to say “I believe...” I’ve begun to wonder why the writers of the creeds of the church did not add as an article of our faith, that when opposed the first apostles – in whom the Holy Spirit dwelt and who by the power of the Holy Spirit spoke “*went away rejoicing that they were counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*”

If you read the first few chapters of the Book of Acts, you would be tempted to say *“oh, this Christian thing is going to come crashing down.”* You can’t read anything Peter wrote, including in our lesson today from his first epistle, that does not suggest that Christians are to be ever aware of and prepared for opposition to what we believe.

“We must obey God rather than men.” Peter and the others were ready to do that – even eager. I submit that sort of determination and conviction, come what may, is what elicited the views expressed by another Jewish leader named Gamaliel who reasoned that if these disciples of Jesus were anything like the disciples of past “messiahs” in Israel the whole Jesus thing would blow over. Citing the sudden and unfortunate demise of two previous such messiahs – Theudas and Judas, he states the obvious - *“eliminate the head... and the body dies.”* But then he hedges his bet and says if the claims of Peter are on the mark (that Jesus, unlike these other predecessors is in fact alive), the Jesus movement not only has legs but lots of room to run.

In verse 39 Gamaliel says if this movement is of God, you’re wasting your breath opposing it – because you’re working against God. The word in verse 39 translated as “overthrow” comes from a Greek word meaning *“loosen like a falling house.”* Gamaliel’s argument was that if Jesus was not alive, Christianity was going nowhere – fast! But if he was, nothing will bring it down. Fascinating that the words of a non-believer, Gamaliel, erodes one of the arguments against Christianity made by non-believers even today, which is that Christianity was a concoction of opportunistic followers who claimed they saw the resurrected Jesus and pinned their hopes on building a following for themselves on it. That building plan, Gamaliel said, never worked before – so why should it now?

It was the faith of the apostles – who preferred to *“suffer disgrace for the name”* rather than be silent that *“gave the church it’s legs.”* They ran with perseverance, even though most of them did not survive another decade until their faith turned to sight through martyrdom. Did the church *loosen like a falling house?* No – the church still stands because of it, and I for one believe Gamaliel had and still has it right – if this faith of ours is of God, and you are of God, and the church is of God, then nothing can stop you or us from running with perseverance the race set before us.

Take to heart what your brother Peter says, *“though you do not see him you love him, and though you do not see him now you believe in him, are filled with joy, and are receiving the outcome of your faith...faith that becomes sight...you will see Him!* AMEN