

Sunday July 3, 2022

Lesson 5: A New Community of Believers

Scripture: Acts 4: 23-31

Context:

We begin a new unit as we continue to unpack life in the Spirit. This next unit focuses on the work of the church as moved by the Holy Spirit. We will examine how the Holy Spirit empowered believers to overcome obstacles, internal as well as external. Today we explore how today's church may share the same confidence found in the early church.

The scripture lesson comes from the book of Acts, a book known as the biography of the early church. Early in the ministry of the remaining eleven disciples and other Christians, trouble continued to brew as the followers of Jesus began to witness to their faith and worship publicly. At one point, Peter and John are brought forward before authorities to explain their faith and the actions they continue to take for someone who was a condemned criminal in the Roman Empire. The focus of the interrogation is on who has given these individuals the authority to say and do the things they present in public life.

After Peter and John are interrogated, they are released as they have not committed a crime. They are of course bullied and threatened, and yet they leave unharmed physically. They return to where the Christians are gathering and begin to recount the events which have taken place. The people listen closely and then there is a time of prayer.

Yet this is not a prayer of supplication, asking God to protect the church from the authorities or for their enemies to be cursed. Instead, their prayer is of thanksgiving for God and a request for boldness to speak to the mighty acts of God in their midst. Like other themes of Lukan writer (the one who wrote both Luke and Acts), there is a focus on boldness as a virtue to possess.¹ Many scholars suspect Theophilus (the recipient of Luke-Acts) was facing trials and tribulations, in need of boldness in the face of persecution.² This prayer being recounted was meant not to just give an account of the event as it was also included to encourage Theophilus and others to remain steadfast in the faith.

This event demonstrates how Christians are called to turn to God when persecution on any level threaten to undo the church. The Christians along with Peter and John are being called to remember they still belong to God before anyone or anything else. Persecution, even by powerful people, does not take us out of God's hand.³ God will continue to be with them especially as they face the unknown future.

The last few verses indicate the faithful heard the prayer as a call to action as well. Even in those uncertain times, they were to witness and worship. They shared their possessions and

¹ Willimon, William H. "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 50.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

were woven together. It was in this rhythm of action and speech, witness and worship, the church discovers its source of life.⁴ And thus the early church gave a template for its predecessors.

Application

In today's circles, we often use the "martyr complex" to focus on someone who believes they are a victim, when they truly are not giving of themselves for any role or purpose. Instead, they are using the term to justify their unprocessed feelings or even assert their desire for power only to be told no. We've all probably played the "martyr complex" before whether in our family/friend dynamics, when someone questions our political or theological beliefs, or when we do not want to engage in true reflection on a situation.

The martyr complex stands in bold opposition though to the scriptures we are given today. Today, the scripture narrates how when the people of God are oppressed or persecuted, the response is not attempting to take control or develop a complex about oneself. Instead, the people of God are called to ask God to make them bold in worship and witness so they might be servants for God.

As I read this passage, I cannot but help think of how easy American Christians have it when it comes to faith and life. Every now and then, we hear Christians say we are being persecuted by the government or the secular world. And while there are certainly some antagonistic attitudes towards Christians and the church, for the most part, we are secure in many ways. We can choose whether we will worship on Sunday morning or choose to sleep in or go do whatever our heart desires. No one can prevent us from gathering at the church or homes to study the Bible or have prayer circles. With our financial resources, we are given the opportunity to give back to the church or spend money in other ways. We live in a place where Christianity does not cost us something.

With such a gift, I cannot help but muse if the church were to see the example of a truly persecuted ancestors of the faith and reflect on how their example in persecution might help us in other ways in today's world. These early disciples when faced with persecution, did not ask God to protect them. Instead, they prayed for boldness along with thanksgiving for what God had already done in their midst and then they banded together to worship and pool their resources together as united in Christ. They were united by a mission to testify to what God was doing in their midst.

While I have not had an opportunity to talk to brothers and sisters in Christ in countries where Christians are persecuted, I unfortunately have had the opportunity to talk to Christians who have been persecuted by others both within and outside the church for their desire to follow Jesus the best way they knew how. It comes from when wealthy people want their way and use sabotage like that of Herod and Pontius Pilate to discredit or silence people who hold them accountable. Or it comes from church leaders who are so focused on preservation they forget to remember the call which brought them to ministry. However it plays out, other people are harmed in the name of Christ.

Yet what I have come to appreciate about these individuals who are persecuted is the fact they do not play the martyr complex. They may be honest about the harm done and yet the first thing they proclaim is knowing who they are in God and what God continues to do in their lives. They continue to worship and witness, knowing retaliation and revenge will never lead to the goodness of God. Instead, they continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit and speak God's word

⁴ Ibid., 51.

with confidence.

In an age where churches seem to constantly be in disarray reflecting the polarization of our country, might we revisit the example of the early church and be given encouragement to not join in these divisive games or martyr complexes. Instead, might we be given the courage to continue to worship, to witness to God by doing what God has called us to do, and coming together in unity instead of dividing by pettiness and selfish ambition. God did a mighty thing with the early church and God can do a mighty thing with us.

How is the martyr complex dangerous for the Christian journey today? What might we learn from the early church in their response to trials and tribulations? How does prayer give us strength for our journey? Why is it important to witness and worship in today's world? In the face of painful rejection, how can you remind yourself God claims and loves you deeply?

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