

“We Must Obey God Rather than Men”

In the name of him who is our Lord and our God, dear friends in Christ: “We must obey God rather than men.” So, says the Apostle Peter to the ruling council of the Jews in today’s reading from the Book of Acts. When these texts were before us three years ago, I mentioned that Peter’s statement was worthy of a sermon all on its own, but that I’d save it for another time while I unpacked the rest of what was going on in the lesson. In view of developments between then and now, I decided that this would be a good day for the sermon I put on hold back then.

But to better understand Peter’s statement, let’s get some context. We’re in early stages of the founding of the Christian Church. The crucified and risen Lord Jesus has only recently ascended bodily into heaven – maybe a matter of weeks before; a few months at most. Before his departure, he commissioned his Apostles to bear witness of all they had heard him say and do. Specifically, they were to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in his name, and how through his suffering and death he had achieved peace between God and mankind. It was a daunting task; one they weren’t up to. But Jesus told them to wait in Jerusalem until they had been clothed with power from on high. That happened only ten days after his ascension. On the day of Pentecost, the Lord Jesus poured out upon them the Holy Spirit from on high. And filled by the Spirit the Apostles were given the insight, wisdom, and boldness to declare the truths of God in Christ Jesus. On that day alone, 3000 Jews became believers in the risen Lord Jesus and were baptized into his name.

Following up on that, it became the practice of the Apostles to go each day to the Temple and teach about Jesus there on the open courts. Because they were still relatively few in number among the many thousands of people who came to worship there each day, their activities went largely unnoticed by the religious authorities. That changed one day when Peter and John encountered a lame beggar as were coming to the Temple grounds. Instead of giving him some money (they didn’t have any), they healed him in the name of Jesus. The guy leaps to his feet in surprise. And then starts hopping and running around in circles praising the Lord and shouting for joy, all the while thanking the two Apostles. His antics soon attract a large crowd. Everybody recognizes him as the beggar at the Temple gate. They’ve seen him hundreds of times and pitied him for the shriveled, useless limbs he was born with. Now they’re amazed to see him on his feet practically doing acrobatics. How’d this happen? They want to know. The guy points at Peter and John and says, “Ask them. They did it.”

Now all eyes are on the Apostles. It’s a captive audience, over 1000 people. So Peter and John use the opportunity to preach about Jesus. He’s the one responsible for this miracle, not us. They tell the crowd that Jesus is Israel’s long promised Savior, that though crucified he rose from the dead and has since ascended into heaven, and that through him they can have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. The crowd listens with rapt attention.

Meanwhile some of the religious authorities appear to see what the commotion is. When they discover the two Apostles preaching about Jesus – the guy they so recently condemned and destroyed – they get really angry. They have the two arrested and taken away. The next day they stand trial before the same body that convicted Jesus not that long ago. Jesus was silent at his trial. He didn’t answer their false accusations because he was bearing the sins of the world. The Apostles, however, are not silent. For them it’s another opportunity to proclaim Christ, which they do boldly and without fear. Standing beside them is the man they healed.

The whole council recognizes him too. Since they can't deny the miracle, they're flummoxed. How do you condemn two men for doing a supernatural good deed? They decide to let the Apostles go, but they charge them never again to preach about Jesus, threatening to punish them severely if they do.

Today's lesson begins at round two. This time it's a whole group of Apostles standing trial before the council for preaching about Jesus. The high priest, acting as the prosecutor, gets in their faces and says, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us."

Ah, the irony: when at the trial of Jesus Pilate, the Roman governor, washed his hands and said, "I am innocent of this man's blood", the high priest and his cronies were only too happy to reply, "Let his blood be on us and our children." Now they want to distance themselves from that crime as if they had nothing to do with it. Richer irony still is that the Apostles do indeed want to bring Jesus' blood on them – not to make them guilty (which they are), but to cleanse them of their sin.

But it's specifically against the accusation that they were preaching about Jesus when commanded not to that Peter replies, "We must obey God rather than men." At issue here is the question of authority and from where it comes. It's basic Fourth Commandment stuff. We understand that God is ruler over all. In the Church he directs affairs through his Holy Word and the power of his Gospel. In civil affairs, the Lord rules to maintain law and order, and to punish evil doers and reward those who do good, through people he has appointed to those tasks. At the most foundational level, parents who rule over their children; and at higher levels magistrates, governors, rulers, kings, presidents – whatever title they have – who direct human governments. As Christians, we are to respect and obey them: they rule in the place of God. They are his agents to do us good. But because their authority comes from God, they are not to be obeyed when they command us to do things contrary to God's Word, or when they tell us not to do things that God has commanded. In such cases, we recognize and obey God's higher authority. It's like being a soldier. They are required to obey all lawful orders of the officers appointed over them. But if an officer orders a private to do something illegal, like shoot some prisoners, the soldier is required to say, "No Sir. I can't do that. I will not obey this order."

This is what we've got with Peter and the Apostles. They were commissioned by Jesus and sent by him to preach the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation in his name. No authority on earth had the power or right to tell them not to. So, when the ruling council of the Jews issued that order, they had to disobey it. They had to obey God rather than men.

Two things to point out here: first, that the council was still to be respected and obeyed in all their legitimate commands. Just because they issued one bad order doesn't mean that they weren't still God's appointed authorities. It didn't negate their right to rule. Only their illegitimate orders had to be disobeyed. Second, there may be consequences for doing what's right. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Jesus, more than anyone, knows what it is to suffer unjustly. He calls his disciples to take up the cross and follow him. We see that happening in today's lesson. The council has the Apostles stripped and beaten. Afterward, they release them with the threats of worse to come if they continue speaking about Jesus. The Apostles leave, not bemoaning the injustice they suffered or resolving to keep quiet in the future; but rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.

The council kept their pledge. They intensified their persecution of Christians. Many suffered prison, confiscation of property, beatings, and even death for their faith in Jesus. Others fled their homes and became exiles and refugees. But wherever they went, they continued to speak the good news of Jesus. The council, in its effort to stamp out the name of Jesus, only ended up spreading it. Soon Christian congregations were popping up everywhere.

Later the source of persecution spread too. Already in the first century, the Roman government got in on the act. After the reign of Tiberius, it became a custom for the Roman Senate to have the living Emperor proclaimed a god. All subjects were ordered to recognize his divinity and to offer a small sacrifice in his honor. From the Roman point of view, it was about pledging loyalty to him. Anyone who didn't offer the sacrifice was considered a traitor. But from the Christian point of view, it was a glaring violation of the First Commandment: You shall have no other gods. They were willing to recognize the Emperor's God-given authority and to obey him in all secular matters; but when it came to offering the sacrifice they said, "We must obey God rather than men." And thousands faced martyrdom as a result.

We are blessed to live in a land in which the right of free exercise of religion is enshrined in our Constitution. However, in the last few years that right has become increasingly narrowly defined. Now it's more like you're free to *believe* what you want, but not necessarily to act or speak in accordance with those beliefs. Witness the case of Judge Neely in Wyoming who was threatened with the loss of her position and ultimately reprimanded for merely saying to a reporter that she herself would not preside over a same sex marriage ceremony. Mind you, she hadn't actually been asked to, and she said she'd refer anyone who did to a judge who would. No matter. The same issue has destroyed the businesses of Christian bakers, photographers, and florists who have lost large sum lawsuits for declining to provide their services for such ceremonies. And I suspect that we're only now seeing the tip of the iceberg of this issue.

Witness also the recently decided Hobby Lobby case, in which the Christian owners of the company refused to purchase health insurance for their employees that included paying for abortions. They didn't want the blood of babies on their hands. Government lawyers insisted that they must comply with their rules. They consider subsidized abortions to be a basic employee right. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which narrowly ruled in favor of the defendants. But the fact that this was a case at all tells us that the times they are a changing.

There are a number of other cases I could cite, but they are indications of the same thing: it's growing more likely that we as individuals and as congregations are going to be placed in situations in which we must say to our civil authorities, "We must obey God rather than men". And we can expect to suffer consequences for doing so. May God give us the courage to stand fast in such trials, and the faith of the Apostles to rejoice when we are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.

But I want to shift gears here. Obeying God rather than men is something that applies not just to civil affairs and our obedience to secular authorities. It applies to the Church as well. During his ministry, Jesus told his disciples that he would deliver to them the keys to the kingdom of heaven; that is, the authority to free and release people from their sins, or when dealing with the unrepentant, to bind them to their sins. In today's Gospel, we see Jesus doing exactly that. His atoning sacrifice that paid the penalty of sin complete, the risen Lord appears to his disciples, breathes on them, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

Christ has given this authority to his whole Church: to speak the forgiveness of sins in his name. And what an authority it is! To speak Jesus' own word of forgiveness to those who confess and repent of their sins. It's what you hear the pastor do publically whenever we hold the Divine Service. Exercising the keys Jesus has given to his Church, the pastor proclaims to those who have confessed, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord, Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

It's wonderful. But sadly, almost all of our non-Lutheran Protestant friends say, "You can't do that! Only God can forgive sins. You're not allowed to say such things." In their churches, they don't. And if they had their way, we wouldn't either. But look: since Christ has given this authority to his Church, we'd be wrong not to use it. We must obey God rather than men.

And that's true even when the opposition arises within our own congregations. The power of the keys works both ways, remember. They are given by Christ not only to free the repentant; but also, to bind the unrepentant, to withhold forgiveness from those who refuse to acknowledge their sins or to repent of them. On occasion, that's necessary too. In Christian love we must tell someone that as long as they continue in their sin and refuse to repent, they are not a part of the body of Christ. They are excluded from his forgiveness. They may not commune at the altar. They are bound to their sin. And if they die in their unrepentant state, they cannot be saved. It's a frightful thing to have to say. And that's the point: it's meant to instill the fear of God and his judgment in the unrepentant heart. Faith comes from hearing the Word. And so, we must speak it.

But this is when we're likely to hear in response, "You can't do that! You don't have that authority! Who are you to say that to me?" Sometimes it's a whole chorus of voices: not just the unrepentant sinner, but their family and friends too – anyone they can recruit to their cause. But the purpose is to save souls that are in peril of being lost forever. Therefore, despite the opposition and whatever negative fallout may result, we speak the words that have to be spoken. We must obey God rather than men.

May Christ our Lord pour out upon us his Holy Spirit to strengthen our faith and enable us to do so, both in the civil realm and in his Church, now and ever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!