

WORTH THE SUFFERING

Acts 5:27-42

Second Sunday of Easter (Series A)

April 19, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The sermon text for this Second Sunday of Easter comes from the book of Acts, chapter 5, verses 27 through 42. It takes place fairly early in the history of the Church, probably between a few months to a couple of years after the resurrection of Jesus. It's hard to tell exactly how long it's been, but it doesn't seem like it's been too long.

The book of Acts is really a continuation of the gospels. The book begins with Jesus' ascension into heaven, forty days after his resurrection from the dead. So it continues the history from that point, but it also continues Jesus' ministry. Jesus entrusted his work to his eleven disciples, whom he appointed as apostles. The opposition from the Jewish rulers continued as well. I'll give you a quick rundown of that before we read the text. In chapter 4 the apostles were ordered not to teach in Jesus' name anymore (4:18). They refused, of course (4:19-20). Then in chapter 5 they were arrested (5:18), but an angel of the Lord released them from prison during the night (5:19-20). Now while most prisoners would make a run for it after a jailbreak, the apostles returned to the scene of the crime, that is, the temple, and they resumed their criminal activity, that is, teaching in Jesus' name (5:21). So the Jewish council summoned them once again (5:26), and that brings us to the reading for today.

From Acts 5, beginning at verse 27, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

And this may mean that we are called to suffer. Jesus was raised from the dead. His suffering is over. He cannot die again. He cannot be beaten again. He can only be persecuted through his Church ... and so he is (9:4). It's not that Jesus wants to be persecuted through his Church, but the world is still hostile to Jesus, and the only way to channel that hostility is toward his Church—the body of Christ on earth.

We see in this passage how Jesus' apostles were persecuted. And they actually considered it an honor to suffer dishonor for the Name of Jesus. They rejoiced that they were counted worthy by God to suffer for Christ's name (5:41).

It seems that human beings don't have much tolerance for suffering. But I once heard a smart man say that's not quite true. He said that we have very little tolerance for suffering ... when we don't know why we are suffering. But if we have a good reason to suffer, we can really endure quite a lot. The supreme example, of course, is mothers giving birth to children. Their suffering is intense, and often very long, but they consider it worth it, so they endure it. And we find many other things in this life that are worth suffering for.

The apostles considered suffering for the sake of Jesus to be worth it. And I can think of two reasons this is significant for us.

First, there is apologetic significance to it. What I mean is, the persecution of the apostles is part of the case for how we know the Christian faith is true.

Among other things, Easter is the season for apologetics. And by "apologetics" we mean the defense of the Christian faith. It's the academic discipline of presenting the rational basis for what we believe. Faith, of course, is more than intellectual, but that does not mean it is anti-intellectual. Our faith is actually quite reasonable. And apologetics is the academic discipline of presenting the reasonable case for the Christian faith.

Apologetics is a necessary part of Christian doctrine. Sometimes I hear other Christians dismiss the discipline of apologetics because, they say, "You can't argue a person into the Kingdom of God." And that may be true. But apologetics can break down the intellectual objections people have to Christianity, and it can lead people to think, "Maybe I should look into this." We actually have the historical data to demonstrate that our faith is reasonable; we shouldn't be afraid to use it.

It's important for every Christian—or at least close to every Christian—to have some knowledge of the historical evidence for Christianity. For one thing, it gives you something to say when your friend asks you why you are a Christian. It doesn't really cut it to say that it just makes you feel good. Any religion can say that, but no religion can prove it, not even Christianity. It's beneficial to your neighbor to be able to give a reason for the hope you have (1 Peter 3:15). And when apologetics is done rightly, the content is really not far from evangelism.

Apologetics is also beneficial to you. Too often, Christians are shaken when they see some yahoo on the History channel say that the Bible is a forgery and the resurrection is a hoax or when they hear their college professor lump Christianity in with all the other religions of the world and say it's merely therapeutic. We should not be shaken by those things, because we have reasonable answers, even proof.

Now, I'm never going to give you a sermon that's full-on apologetics training, but from time to time, especially during Easter, I'll give you little nuggets. And we do this more during the Easter season, because Christian apologetics revolves around the resurrection of Jesus

The claims of Christianity stand or fall on the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, he is a hoax and our faith is in vain. But if he did rise from the dead, then it is reasonable to conclude that he is who he says he is—the Son of God in human flesh—and that he accomplished what he says he accomplished—the forgiveness of sins.

Part of the historical case for Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the willingness of his apostles to suffer. People don't suffer for no reason. But these men were willing to suffer disgrace. They were willing to be arrested and beaten. Later in their lives, they were even willing to be killed for their faith. But you might say, "So what? Lots of people are willing to suffer for something they believe in, but that doesn't make their faith true." And that's right. I imagine every religion in the world has some kind of martyr. In every religion, the true believers are willing to suffer. But that doesn't make those religions true. Even today, many Christians die for their faith, but that does not make the Christian faith true. All it proves is that the martyr is a true believer. The thing that sets the persecution of the apostles apart is that they were the first generation of believers, and the entire existence of the Christian faith was based on their eyewitness testimony that Jesus rose from the dead. Many people will suffer for their faith, but no one suffers for a faith they know to be false. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, the apostles would have known that. Christianity would have been a hoax orchestrated by them. There would have been no reason to suffer. And there would have been no reason to continue teaching in Jesus' name. They knew it would only bring more suffering. So why would they willingly suffer? Why would Peter say to the high priest, "We must obey God rather than men"? They told their authorities that they would continue to disobey them, and they didn't even care what the consequences would be. The only reasonable explanation for all of this is that they actually saw what they say they saw: Jesus, risen from the dead. They were sincere eyewitnesses.

We also see some supporting evidence in Gamaliel's advice. Gamaliel was a wise and well-respected Pharisee. He was also the Apostle Paul's teacher, before Paul became a Christian, of course (22:3). Gamaliel wasn't a Christian, but he had some natural wisdom. He reminded the council of the history of others who had gained a following, first Theudas (5:36) and then Judas (5:37)—not the same Judas who betrayed Jesus. In both cases, after those men died, their followers were scattered, and their little movements came to nothing. Gamaliel's advice is basically to let the same thing play out regarding Jesus. If he's a hoax, and Jesus is really dead, it will fade, but if the resurrection is true, you won't be able to resist it anyway.

Gamaliel's advice is mostly helpful, although we wouldn't say that everything that lasts is necessarily true. Most religious claims fade with a little time, but there are a few other religions, besides Christianity, that have endured for centuries or even millennia. And they can't all be true, because they contradict one another.

But what we can say is that the apostles were mostly just ordinary Galilean fishermen, who made a bold claim that Jesus had risen from the dead, and they spread this report all over Israel. It's the sort of thing that, if it's false, someone could have proved it false. All you have to do is prove that Jesus is still dead. But no one did disprove it, and, instead, their movement continued to grow all over Israel, and, very quickly, all over the world. If Gamaliel could see now what has become of this little movement, I suspect he would give it some serious consideration. And that's the basic point of apologetics—to make someone think, "This stuff might actually be true."

So the first way in which the apostles' suffering is significant for us is the apologetic force it has. The second way is that it demonstrates to us that the Christian faith is worth suffering for.

When we talk about suffering for the Christian faith, we're talking about those afflictions that are specifically linked to the fact that we confess Jesus as Lord. We're not talking about the loneliness or monotony of social distancing. We're not talking about death, illness, financial stress, etc., because everyone has those problems. And when we talk about persecution, we're not talking about having to worship online instead of in person. That's not persecution, because the same orders or recommendations apply to everyone else. Persecution is when you get singled out because you are a Christian. Suffering for the sake of Christ is only those afflictions that come because we are Christians.

And so it always seems a little bit weird talking about this in the United States, because we see very little, if any, real persecution. But it's still something we need to talk about, because many of our brothers and sisters in the world are facing it, and it's completely possible that it can happen here. There is hardly a place in the world where persecution of Christians has not occurred. In many of those places, Christianity was once tolerated; it may have even been the majority religion. But then something changed, and it wasn't long before Christians were tortured or even killed for their faith.

I'm really bad at predicting the winds of culture and politics, so I'm not even going to try to predict whether or not we will face persecution here in our lifetimes. But I do know that we must be ready. And by "ready," I don't mean ready to fight; I mean ready to endure. When persecution comes, our biggest concern should not be our rights, but our faith. And I'm not saying we should be unconcerned about our civil rights. If we can use our civil rights to proclaim forgiveness in Jesus' name, we should absolutely do it. But if our concern is really just our own comfort, that's a problem. Furthermore, human laws cannot bind the Word of God. It's been tried before, and it hasn't worked. Often, it's resulted in the opposite. The Christian faith has flourished under persecution. So when persecution comes, it's okay to be concerned about our civil rights, but they are of little importance when compared to our faith.

Without facing persecution here, we really don't have anything to press us to consider whether or not the Christian faith is really worth it. What would you do if this—worship, either online or in person—became illegal? Or what if it became illegal to confess Jesus as Lord in public? Some who now confess Jesus as Lord would stop. They would give in and deny Christ. But others would finally consider just how essential our Christian faith is, because it really is a matter of life and death, eternally.

I've heard reports that Christians in persecuted areas of the world pray for us that we would also be persecuted, so that we would be forced to consider the value of our faith. Suffering and persecution have a way of focusing us on what is truly valuable. I'm not about to start praying for persecution; I'm too selfish for that. But I do pray that we all would be led to consider the value of our Christian faith and that we would see the treasure of salvation we have in Jesus Christ.

And if we should suffer dishonor for the sake of Christ, may we consider it a joy that we would be counted worthy. The apostles rejoiced. This sounds really weird, but it's rooted in our Savior's glory. The glory of Jesus Christ is the cross, where he suffered and died for the sin of the world. Persecution for the sake of Jesus is to share in his sufferings, and when we share in his sufferings, we also share in his glory, for his suffering is his glory. It's a glory that the world does not see, but the Church sees it and rejoices in it. We rejoice in the sufferings of Jesus Christ,

WORTH THE SUFFERING (Acts 5:27-42)

and we honor those who are dishonored by the world. At the present, this honor is hidden from public view, just as Christ's glory is still hidden from the world. But on that day, when he appears, then we also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:4).

Make up your mind beforehand that any suffering you may endure for the sake of Jesus Christ is absolutely worth it. It is worth it because his suffering was for you, in order to forgive your sins and secure your place in the resurrection from the dead and God's new creation. May God grant his Holy Spirit to preserve us until that day. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, **"Surely I am coming soon."** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)