

Acts 5:27-32

This sermon is not for heroes. It is for the hesitant and the timid. This sermon is not for the militant who march in demonstrations of protest. It is for the meek who are afraid to act out their faith in public. This sermon is not for the players on the field who "suitup" and carry the ball; it is for the spectators who sit in the stadium. This sermon is for those who are not leaders, and who never will be. This is a sermon for ordinary people. Particularly, it is for the ordinary people who, because they cannot do something outstanding for the Lord, do nothing.

We begin, where we are - the Second Sunday of Easter. Traditionally, this is known as "Low Sunday," when church attendance hits a yearly all-time low, and my energy level is just beginning to be renewed after Lent and Holy Week. In most of our minds, the big event is over. We celebrated the open tomb, the resurrection, and the living Lord. What could possibly top that? Our text this morning does not try to top the drama of the resurrection; rather, it stresses that the drama of the resurrection is far from over. It has just begun.

The story of our text is similar, at many points, to the Easter story. The verses before our reading from Acts this morning tell of an imprisonment, guards, an angel, an open door, and a miraculous escape. Peter and the other apostles have been preaching about the risen Christ. They are arrested and thrown into jail. Suddenly, an angel appears and leads them past the guards through an opened iron gate to freedom. Then the angel says to them, "Go stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life."

When the Sanhedrin - the full assembly of the elders of Israel - heard that the apostles had broken out of jail and were preaching to the people in the temple, they were at first puzzled, and then they became furious. Immediately, the captain, with his officers, was sent to arrest them. "But," the high priest adds, "arrest them without violence." This was said because, not only were the elders of Israel furious, they were afraid. Our text points out that the captain and his officers did not use force because they "were afraid of being stoned by the people."

Our reading this morning begins as, for the second time, Peter and the apostles were arrested and brought, again, before the council of the temple. The high priest pointed an accusing finger at them and shouted, "We strictly charged you not to teach in his name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching!" Then, Peter stood defiantly before the Sanhedrin and uttered some of the greatest words recorded in the New Testament: "We must obey God, rather than men." This is a story of raw courage. At the same time, it is a drama of daring determination.

The star players in this drama are Peter and the high priest. They stood as challenging opponents in the confines of the temple. Gathered about Saint Peter were a few of the apostles. Surrounding the high priest were the influential leaders of the elders of Israel. These two groups stood face to face, eye to eye, and toe to toe. The high priest and his supporters were angry, jealous, and fearful. Peter and his followers were daring, dedicated, and determined. There was no compromise proposed. There was no treaty of peace possible. It was a duel to the death.

Now, as we picture this scene in our minds, there is an important and a decisive element missing. It is missing because we have failed to hear all that the author of Acts is telling us. He records the conflict, which the early church encountered, as it embarked

upon its mission of proclaiming Christ to the world. We hear the general outline of the history of the church; but, that is all. However, when we read this passage of Scripture carefully, we will notice that, again and again, the writer speaks about "the people." They are not presented as props, nor are they used as parts of the scenery to enhance the drama; rather, the people are the real focal point of the whole drama.

When Peter and the apostles are miraculously rescued from prison, the angel tells them why they have been released. The angel says to them, "Preach to the people." When the apostles preached in the temple, the Sanhedrin, the high priest, and the Sadducees were furious; and, at the same time, they were afraid. Why? Why were these religious leaders afraid? Were they afraid because the message that was being proclaimed in the name of God was contrary to their beliefs? Perhaps. However, the heart and the core of the Sanhedrin's response of fury and fear revolved around one focal point - the potential power of the people. The leaders of Israel couldn't have cared less about an ignorant fisherman telling his tales about a carpenter's son, one who claimed to be the Messiah and was found guilty of treason; thereby, ending up on a criminal's cross. The Sanhedrin did care, however, that Peter and the apostles were spreading the rumor that the crucified one had risen and was still alive. The high priest, in particular, cared to the point of deep personal concern, that the people in the streets, in the synagogues, and in the temple were listening to this "fish-tale" about a risen Lord. The people were not only listening to it; they were believing it. And, the greatest concern of all was that the number of those listening and believing was growing by leaps and bounds each day.

The key to understanding the power, which the early church possessed, is the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was present within the apostles and within those who listened and believed. The Holy Spirit was present in the people, and that gave them a power which threatened the very structure of society.

The history of the early church, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, seems at first reading, to focus only on the heroes. At first, Peter is the center of attention; then, Paul and his missionary journeys take center stage. They are the giants of the Book of Acts. They are the ones who spearheaded the expansion of the Christian faith around the world. But our fascination with the giants of the faith must not blind us to the fact that the ones who stand out in the history of the church was and is the people - the Spirit-filled people - the unknown, the unnamed, the common, and the ordinary people who were filled with the Holy Spirit. Thus, possessed with the power of the Holy Spirit, they not only heard, but they believed - and they followed. The people are the heart that beats beneath the skin and within the body of the recorded history of the church. Ordinary people, like you and like me, who do not make history - but who are enlivened by the Holy Spirit - make the history of the church possible.

This sermon began by saying that it was not a sermon for heroes, or for the militant, or for the quarterbacks who carry the ball; rather, it is a word for the hesitant, the timid, and the spectators of life. It is a word to those of us who recognize that we do not have the courage, the talent, or the skills to assume leadership in the church and to do something spectacular for the Lord - which, more than likely, includes most of us here this morning. We are ordinary people who live ordinary lives. We may be retired, doing whatever our day brings to us, or we may go to work, or stay at home and work. We clean house and

cook meals. We try to live as decent and as useful lives as possible. However, the majority of us are not leaders. We might be petrified to speak in public. We believe in Christ. We love God. But, when we pray, we pray in private. Just as soon as the spotlight of attention moves our way, we head for the nearest exit and find somewhere to hide. If this describes you; then our text this morning has a message especially for you. It says to you, "Do not hide. You are important. You are an essential element of all history. Even greater, you in particular, are an important part of the history of the church." The church has been built, not only with the mighty rocks of faith such as a Peter or a Paul; but, it has also been built with thousands of pebbles and millions of grains of sand - the spirit-filled ordinary, "little" people who form and make possible the mighty structures of the church. You are the people - you are the people of God, and when God fills you with the Holy Spirit, ordinary people can do big things and can accomplish extraordinary tasks. Never say to yourself, "Because I cannot do something spectacular and outstanding for the Lord, I might as well do nothing." Do something. No matter how small or insignificant the deed, do it! You are the people of God. The whole revelation of God is to you the people, and for you the people.

You may think that your effort would be only a "drop in the bucket." However, place a bucket under a dripping faucet. In no time at all, it will be filled. Or, consider a tiny snowflake that is hardly noticed when it falls on the back of your hand. Multiply those snowflakes, and they can become a power-packed avalanche capable of burying an entire city. The multiplication of those snowflakes can form a tremendous storm that can paralyze a mighty metropolis, like New York City.

What potential power that we, the people, possess when the Holy Spirit works in us and through us! God knows this. This is why every story of the Bible is without question grounded on the call of God to his people and their response. God continually calls people to be faithful, not just in great deeds of courage and daring, but in the little day-by-day acts of faithful living that, when added all together, can create a mighty movement of faith.

Our text says that the Sanhedrin and the high priest feared the people. They knew that a word spoken possesses no power in and by itself; but, a word spoken by God and heard by God's people - a people who are filled with the Holy Spirit - can change the whole world. And it did!

Do you sometimes think that your life is more like a silent pile of useless junk rather than it is like a symphony? If so, listen to the Word of God. It is a story of a creator, a composer, and a conductor. But more - it is the story of simple ordinary things like a string, or a peg, or a white key, or a black key that are all part of a piano and the grand plan for producing the symphony of God. If you are a part of the whole, you are important. Your life does have meaning and value, if you have a part to play in God's symphony.

Rejoice. You are the people of God. You are the people whom God loves because you are a part of his whole creation plan. You are the people for whom and through whom a kingdom symphony is being created by God. Listen. The conductor is tapping his baton. Get ready. God is about to use you to produce a symphony of glorious sounds that will not only fill the halls of heaven but will also change the very rhythmic pattern of history and determine the dominant tempo and the tune of eternity. All glory be to God