



“We Must Obey God”

Preaching Text: Acts 5:27-32

7 April 2013: 2nd Sunday of Easter

Communion Sunday

First United Methodist Church, Arlington, Texas

I have a friend who has an extreme interest in justice. One day he told a group of us about a bully at the park who appeared to be picking on younger children who were playing there. My friend who was playing on a tennis court in Georgetown said that a man sitting in a car at the park yelled at the bully to leave all the other kids alone. The bully then mocked the man, as a bully is likely to do at a distance. Evidently, the man in the car had seen and heard enough from this young tough guy so he stretched out his 6’ 5” frame from the car to rise to the bully’s challenge. At this point the bully, who realized he was badly mismatched with the older and much larger man, turned to run. Unfortunately, for the bully, he ran right into a volleyball post knocking himself senseless. “Justice was done then and there,” my friend said!

Fear, intimidation, and bullying are things most of us have to endure during one season or another of life. Sometimes it is on the playground; sometimes in the classroom; sometimes in a supervisor’s office. Our lesson today addresses religious intimidation before those who administer the council on behalf of the Jewish authorities. Hear our lesson for the day:

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:27-32).

What got the apostles to this spot “before the council?” The religious authorities have arrested Peter and John for teaching and proclaiming that “in Jesus there is



resurrection of the dead” (4:2). Although the Sanhedrin has ordered them “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” they do not punish these disciples because of their popularity among the *hoi polloi* (“the many” or “the majority”). Yet because they will not submit, the authorities imprison the apostles; however, an angel frees them (v. 19). Then they go right back to preaching the resurrection and the temple police drag them before the council yet again.

Now the high priest charges that the apostles put the blame for Jesus’ death on the religious authorities (“you are determined . . . ” v. 28). Peter insists that the followers of Jesus must obey God’s will rather than the Sanhedrin’s orders (v. 29). They use Jewish terms to do so—for example, the “God of our ancestors” (v. 30) is the God of Israel (and of Christians): he has “raised” Jesus from the dead. The Law prescribed that a person guilty of a capital offence be hanged “on a tree;” Peter interprets cross as being the Roman equivalent to the Jewish tree. Moses was “Leader and Savior” (v. 31) of Israel, under God; Jesus is much more so: he goes before us; now with the Father, he continues to rescue us from sin and death. Jesus’ message was first to “Israel.” Both the apostles and the “Holy Spirit” (v. 32), given to the faithful, are “witnesses” to Christ’s actions.

This text really focuses on what Peter says when he says, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” The Hebrew word for obey means “to hear.” Isn’t it interesting that the Bible connects obedience to hearing.

The superb writer, Eugene Peterson (*The Message*) tells a story about listening to a neighbor and finding out that he was wrong about something and how happy he was to find out he was wrong. Peterson writes:

A few years ago I was in my backyard with my lawnmower tipped on its side. I was trying to get the blade off so I could sharpen it. I had my biggest wrench attached to the nut but couldn’t budge it. I got a four-foot length of pipe and slipped it over the wrench handle to give me leverage, and I leaned on that—still unsuccessfully. Next I took a large rock and banged on the pipe. By this time I was getting emotionally involved with my lawnmower.



Then my neighbor walked over and said that he had a lawnmower like mine once and that, if he remembered correctly, the threads on the bolt went the other way. I reversed my exertions and, sure enough, the nut turned easily (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p.38).

Sometimes by listening to a voice we would not otherwise heed we save ourselves a lot of frustration and grief. To hear is to some degree to be able to obey. Deuteronomy 11:26–28 sums it up like this: “Obey and you will be blessed. Disobey and you will be cursed.”

This is the call that God offers us and that Peter and the other apostles heeded when Peter said for the group: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” We always have a choice: listening obedience or heedless disobedience. God places the choice before us.

Deuteronomy 11:26-28 puts the choice like this:

26 See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27 the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today; 28 and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods