

The Rock: 06-7-2020**The Church**

First reading: Acts 26: 22-29

Title: Civil disobedience / Social discourse

Scripture: Acts 4:1-22

Theme:

At what point is it genuinely ok to disobey the authorities whom God has set over us? What should be the reasons we do so, and how ought we to protest, if and when that time comes?

Introduction:

Last week we looked at the Church and her mission in the world. If I could sum it up in one short statement, it would be:

Love God-Love People-Tell them why.

It captures who and what we are supposed to be in this world. The great commission from Matthew 28 and Acts 1. Go into all the world, tell them about me and what I have done for them.

Remember to love them, as I have loved you. A rag tag group of dysfunctional, self-centered, temper filled, doubters. More focused on their own ideas about how Jesus ought to do things than his call to love your neighbor as yourself.

Tell them to Love God and to love people, because God so loved the world that he gave to us His own son in order that we have a way home.

That is the Gospel in its simplest form, and given that the gospel needs to be grasped by a person with a PhD, as well as a little child still learning to spell their name, we ought always to stay focused on its simplistic beauty.

We all grow older, and hopefully we grow up as well. Not just in maturity by way of the world we live in, but in Christ. Sorting out the important things from the non-important.

So ,what should the church be known for? That is a deeply important question, and one that is typically answered very easily.

We are known for what we want to be known for. Attaching ourselves to particular issues and making them our

prime mission. Whether they be a social issue, a political stance, a particular point of view, or doctrinal stance.

If we follow the simple: Love God-Love people-tell them why, I believe we end up being know by our love. For one another, and for every human being.

Unified in Christ, for the cause of Christ and the Gospel in the world. One thing I desire to avoid is the trap of always being known simply because of what we are against, rather than what we are for.

The Story:

That brings us to the topic this week of civil disobedience and social discourse. When is it ok to be disobedient as the Church in this world?

As important as the how are we to be disobedient, is the how we are to dialogue with those we disagree with.

Because ultimately my goal and your goal, is to win people for Christ. Not win an argument. We can win an argument, prove the point, keep our rights, and lose the person.

If that happens, we have actually lost, both in our mission and our purpose. And as we look at this passage today, I think the most important verse to take away is probably verse 13:

"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

-Acts 4:13 ESV

Peter and John are not seen as rebellious and contentious men. Nor are they seen as healers, as though that is their primary mission now in making a name for themselves.

They are known as men who had been with Jesus.

How did they get there? Why are they before the very group of men who had condemned Jesus not three months prior?

Was it because they healed a man who had been crippled since the day he was born?

"And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those

entering the temple. Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, "I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!"

-Acts 3:2-6 ESV

Had this group of believers been protesting and sowing discord among the people of Jerusalem? Marching and holding signs proclaiming that the new way to live is the only way to live?

If you don't follow the way you are going to burn in hell. Well, no. Luke takes great care to tell us:

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and

distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

-Acts 2: 42-47 ESV

No, the baptism in the Holy Spirit which we learned about last week, changed these men and women. They no longer were looking out for their own interests.

They certainly weren't out and about making all kinds of noise to guarantee their right to exist. No, they loved God, they were loving people, and every chance they got, they were telling people why.

Peter, after this little incident of healing on the temple steps, remember this is Peter, the one who denied he even knew Jesus a short few months ago, is once again doing what?

Preaching and teaching about Jesus.

"And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But what God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer, he thus fulfilled. Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago."

-Acts 3:17-21 ESV

Skipping to verse 25:

"You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."

-Acts 3:25-26 ESV

I take us carefully through these, very purposefully. Why? Because there is a reason and a time for civil

disobedience. And it is not because we don't get our own way.

Chapter 4, verse 1:

"And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.

-Acts 4:1-4 ESV

The leaders were not bothered by the miracle of healing. We don't see that at all. What do we see?

That they were annoyed at the proclamation of the Gospel.

"Proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead."

This is why they had them arrested. Not because they were demanding their rights, not because they were causing a scene in protest at the killing of

Jesus or even showing off the man who had been healed.

It was the proclamation of Jesus. If we understand what this means, it will help us a great deal in trying to sort out when it is ok, as a Church, to become civilly disobedient.

Because, when we are disobedient, when we defy those whom God puts in authority over us, it better be for the right reason. Why? Because that is what we will become known for.

As Elders, we have talked about this. When is it ok to defy our leaders? Will there come a time when we have to? More than likely, yes there will.

We want to do so for the biblical reason, and not for our own purposes. Remember last week, I hope so. What did I say? Our right to proclaim the gospel and minister to people has not been taken away, only the way we meet.

That is not a reason to defy the authorities. Now, we may want to, I may even want to. But that is not the right reason. It's not about me or you, it's about Jesus and our mission.

When the Gospel is proclaimed, Jesus is made known AND human beings are re-valued. Those are reasons to defy authority, when those are taken away, we must take a stand.

Remember verse 13? The leaders saw that these men had been with Jesus. The re-valuing of a crippled man when God healed him, brought Peter and John to their attention.

However, it was that they had been with Jesus, that caused the deep concern:

"But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name."

-Acts 4:14-17 ESV

They didn't say: "don't heal people anymore." Although that is implicit within their statement. What they

decide is to tell them don't talk about Jesus to anyone, anymore.

THAT is a line which the authorities, the very ones GOD has put in place, both here in our text today, and those within our world right now, cannot cross.

It denies us the right to fulfill our prime mission and in fulfilling our prime mission, we re-value EVERY human-being. The gospel demands that the church speak for those who are oppressed, those who are abused, those who lack voice.

The racial divide within our country is an example of this. FIGHT against politicizing this, please!

People of color, people of different ethnic backgrounds, etc.. when they are mistreated and abused by those in authority, it is the responsibility of the church to say, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr.

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere...Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

-Letter from Birmingham jail. April 16, 1963

Civil disobedience by the Church must be for those reasons alone. Not because I feel as though my rights are somehow violated.

In fact, not once did the disciples complain in that way. They were always concerned more for the other and for the ability to speak about Jesus and what he has done for humanity.

"So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus."

-Acts 4:18 ESV

Peter and John recognize right away that this is not a line they can cross. But they do not flip out. They don't take to the streets in protest against the government and their oppressive tactics.

Not at all. This is where social discourse comes in:

"But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

-Acts 4:19-20 ESV

Do we respond in this way? Sadly, far too often we don't and what we end up with is a cocky, arrogant, protesting person, who actually draws attention to themselves as opposed to the cause of Christ.

That person, that church then becomes known for that issue and behavior, and NOT as one who loves God, loves people, and is trying to tell them why.

Even if they do, it is lost in their inappropriate behavior and approach. You see, you can be right and still be wrong. You can win the argument and lose the person. We do not want to be there.

Here with Peter and John, there is a HUMBLE BOLDNESS in this statement.

Listen, it's not about us guys, it's about Jesus. He gave us one task, and now you want us to stop with that assignment? We can't do that.

Why? Because, as you know full well, it is all of our jobs to listen to and obey God, not man. What is the result?

"And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people,

for all were praising God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing was performed was more than forty years old.”

-Acts 4:21-22 ESV

They let them go. Later in verse 29, the disciples pray, and what they pray for, is so very important:

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

-Acts 4:29-30 ESV

Holy Boldness to proclaim the Gospel, and the power to heal. The re-valuing of human beings, those who bear the image of the Creator of the universe. The ones for whom Jesus of Nazareth - the risen King and Lord, died for.

Application:

How we act and how we engage the culture we live in impacts how the Gospel is seen and received. What are people seeing in us?

When we protest, are we doing so for the right reasons? If this were as simple and clear-cut as this case (and it can be if we are focused on the right things) life would be easier for us.

This sermon would be much shorter and we could all just go fishing. But its not. Because the Gospel brings to light the injustices in this world, and it reveals the de-valuing of human beings because of policy, process, and action.

The Church needs to be THE voice in those circumstances, and that means, civil disobedience must always be for the right reasons.

That way, when it comes time to speak and act, people won't look at us and say: Oh man, here we go again...

They will have to say: These people have been with Jesus, and they mean business. Not only do they talk Jesus, they walk the Jesus life out.

John and Peter stood their ground because they were making much of Jesus, and that is our prime mission.

Within that, is making sure all human beings are being valued. How we defend

and proclaim makes all the difference in the world. In the market place of ideas and worldviews, we must hold out the hope found in Jesus as the only way to be right with God AND with each other.

If ever we are to be disobedient, let's do so for the right reason and in the right way. Making much of our King, Jesus in the process, in order that many sons and daughters may come to glory.

That is what the Church needs to be known for.

I leave you with this thought. Paul had been in prison for some time in Jerusalem, over two years in fact. And here is the only complaint we have recorded. In testifying before Agrippa the king, he is proclaiming the Gospel.

Not giving a diatribe about the injustice of his imprisonment. But rather, in an effort to reach the king he says:

"King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe." And Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" And Paul said, "Whether

short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

-Acts 26:27-29

Except for these chains...