



SERMON

Preached
Sunday, April 11, 2010

The Politics of Easter

*We must obey God
rather than human
authority. – Acts 5.29b*

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One of the scriptural threads that we follow after Easter is in the book of Acts. Written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke, Acts is the book of the New Testament that tells about the development of the early Christian Church. As such, it makes sense to look at Acts after Easter. With the resurrection comes a new Easter faith. And with the new Easter faith comes a new community that bears witness to that faith.

Jesus' disciples might have wished for quiet time after Easter to contemplate and celebrate the resurrection. They might have wished for a lighter schedule to catch up on their sleep after those emotional days at the end of Jesus' life. Instead, according to Acts, what they got was an urgent sense of duty to share the good news they had experienced. What this got them, within a very short time, was trouble with the authorities. The apostles were actively teaching, preaching, and healing. The people who thought they had a monopoly on these activities had them thrown in prison. Thanks to a rescue effort from an angel, they didn't stay in prison long. (Acts 5.17-20)

This background leads us into the drama presented in this morning's reading:

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.”

—Acts 5.27-29

The religious authorities, apparently, were upset about the teaching of the apostles for two reasons. First, they were offended that a bunch of uneducated, lower-class upstarts had the audacity to assume the role of teacher. Second, they didn’t like the fact that what the apostles were teaching seemed to implicate them in the death of Jesus. They were fearful of what the crowds might do if that theory ever gained broad public acceptance.

What it all comes down to, really, is that the apostles were in trouble for presenting to the world their interpretation of reality. The people in power wanted the world to think that the death of Jesus was just the routine dispatching of a troublesome crackpot. But, because they knew the risen Christ, the apostles knew that Jesus’ death was about something else. It wasn’t about keeping order in society; it was about God breaking in to society to establish a new order. Those who benefit from the present order rarely appreciate a contrary message.

When the apostles were pressured to be silent about what they knew and understood, they simply could not do it:

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” —Acts 5.29

Certainly they were frightened by the prisons and the courtrooms. But ever since Easter, they knew too much about a different reality to give in to that fear. They

didn't set out to be political troublemakers. In fact, they didn't think that they were being "political" at all—they were just healing and teaching. But because politics is largely about ideas and about the power to shape how people understand the world, they found themselves in political trouble.

A few months earlier, this rag-tag bunch couldn't have imagined themselves standing up and defying the orders of the council. But now they understood that they were responsible to an authority higher than any human council: "We must obey God rather than any human authority."

As the spiritual ancestors of these brave apostles, we have the responsibility to order our allegiances in a way that fits with the truth of Easter. If the powers of the world proclaim the victory of death, we must stand fast for life. If the rulers of the world ask for our undiluted loyalty, we must respectfully decline—we owe that to someone else. If the cries of the mob advocate an understanding of the world that does not take into account the power of God's Easter act, then we must separate ourselves from the mob, risking (as we will) being misunderstood and mislabeled.

This morning's small lesson from Acts reminds us that the Gospel has a political dimension. Now, when we think "political," we tend to think about elections and parties, filibusters and budget reconciliation—that sort of thing. But the core meaning of "politics" is really something more basic. Aristotle is often quoted as having said, "Man is a political animal." But a better rendering of that translation might be, "Human beings are suited for life in the polis." Human life, in ancient Greek thought, was given order by the civil community of the polis. The polis—something like a city-state—was a community that gave its members a sense of meaning and understanding. It defined their world.

For Christians, the church is a sort of polis that exists within the larger nations and states that we are more likely to think of as "political." But because the Church offers us a meaning-producing story and a way of understanding the world, it is

really “political” in a deeper way. As Christians we have a particular understanding of who we are as human beings: we are created by the One God. As Christians we have a particular understanding of our ongoing need for God: we are sinners in need of redemption. As Christians we have a particular understanding of when the world changed decisively: we are born anew in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Christians we have a particular set of allegiances: we obey God first and only then human authority.

The disciples didn’t set out to be “political.” They certainly didn’t intend to, nor did they, create a new political party. Nevertheless, they committed themselves to a vision of a different kind of world and to a different story about that world. As the Church grew and defined itself more clearly, sometimes that meant political tension and conflict. Peter and the disciples were ordered not to share or teach the story of God’s redeeming love in Christ. Because they were part of a community that had the resurrection message at its very core, it was an order they could not obey. “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

What would we do if we were tested like that?