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Barbara Ewy

Acts 5:17-41

On Whose Authority?

I believe I was in third or fourth grade on the Sunday morning when my Sunday school teacher introduced a police officer during our Sunday school opening. I don’t remember what either said. I suspect that she interviewed him about his work. What I do remember is that our memory verse that day was Acts 5:29: “We must obey God rather than men.” (King James Version). That, I think, was my introduction to separation of church and state. To this day, I have not forgotten that verse.

The verse itself is pulled from Peter’s speech before the Sanhedrin after the apostles have been arrested for teaching in the temple about Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is not the first time they have been brought before the Sanhedrin. In Acts chapter 4 Peter and John have been arrested and are brought before the Council. They have been healing the sick and preaching about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. People are listening to them and coming to them for healing done in Jesus’ name.

The priests and Sadducees are annoyed with them. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. Nor did they like the implication, the true implication, that they were instrumental in bringing about Jesus’ death on the cross. “By what power or by what name did you do this?” they ask. Peter replies, “if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.” The council did not know what to do with Peter and John. Finally, they ordered them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Peter and John answered, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” After threatening them again, the Council released them.

Peter and John went to the other believers, their friends, and reported what had happened. This led to a prayer meeting where the believers prayed for boldness: “now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants 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.”

The apostles continued to gather in Solomon’s Portico at the temple, teaching and healing in Jesus’ name. Again, the religious leaders are filled with jealousy because the people are listening with respect to the apostles. They send the temple police and put the apostles into prison. During the night an angel of the Lord (the Greek word means messenger) opens the prison doors and leads them out, telling them, “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.” At daybreak the apostles go to the temple and continue with teaching and speaking to the people. That sets up the next confrontation with the religious leaders which we read in our text today. I like the way the NRSV translates Peter’s response to the Sanhedrin: “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

That verse has been called the “most Mennonite” verse in the Bible because of the value placed on obedience to Christ in a life of discipleship. Hans Denck was an early Anabaptist leader and theologian. His response to the reformation’s emphasis on faith alone was this: “No one can truly know Christ unless he follow him daily in life.” This meant that obedience to Christ must supercede every other authority…whether that be civil, cultural, economic, social, or even religious. This has implications for how we live our lives, for what we choose to do and not do, for what we accept in the culture and society around us, and for what we reject.

We have the written Word, the Bible, to guide us, but Christians do not always agree on interpretation and meaning. We need discernment. I do not believe the apostles were advocating civil or religious disobedience just for the sake of protest. Their actions grew out of the conviction that they were doing what God had called them to do. They were called to be witnesses who had walked and talked and learned from Jesus, who had not only seen his death but experienced his resurrection. They were continuing the work that Jesus had come to do…that is proclaiming the kingdom of God, a God who desires wholeness and well being for all people, a God who chose forgiveness instead of vengeance, a God who chose suffering instead of coercion, a God who is greater even than the power of death.

The apostle’s conviction that they were called to be witnesses was strengthened by the presence of God’s Holy Spirit with them, including the power to bring healing in Jesus’ name. When threatened by other authorities, the apostles turned to prayer, and once again were empowered by the Spirit to speak and act with boldness. When facing persecution, arrest and flogging, the apostles rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.

We too, are called to witness to God’s kingdom, to continue the work of Jesus, inviting others to join us as we live into that kingdom. This is the work of the church, not the work of government or other authorities. Yes, we call on government and other civil authorities to make choices that are life-giving and seek the welfare of people. But there is no divine right of kings. Neither government nor culture nor society nor any other human authority is the vehicle that God has chosen to bring about God’s kingdom. We must not be seduced by the lure of legislating our beliefs into society or culture or our nation. While we want legislation that is life-giving, we do not use coercion to force people to be like us. That is not God’s way.

In his book, *The Anabaptist Story,* William Estep says this about our Anabaptist forebears: “If the Anabaptists teach us anything, it is that those who fear freedom and court the governments of this world in the interest of a more moral or ‘Christian’ state are placing their faith in a broken reed. For the Anabaptists, there is only one way, the way of the cross, for the church to become ‘salt, light, and leaven’ in any society and in every age.”

In the Mennonite Church we proclaim that Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our lives, and reconciliation is the center of our work. To claim Jesus as the center of our faith means that we build our lives on obedience, choosing to live as Jesus’ taught us. This is not about a list of rules or simple morality. Jesus teaches us what living in God’s kingdom is like. It is a way of living that seeks the welfare of others as well as ourselves. It seeks to live by God’s ways because we understand that God wants what is best for all of us together. We understand the Bible through Jesus’ life and teachings, through his death and resurrection. God’s Spirit empowers us, also, to witness to what God is still doing through Jesus in our world today. Our understanding of Jesus guides our own choices and actions.

The apostles also relied on the witness of the Holy Spirit among them. When faced with opposition they resorted to prayer. They did this as a group of believers, not just as individuals. They also ate together, sharing what they had with each other. This fellowship was important and counter-cultural. It broke down the economic differences within the group. We proclaim that community is the center of our lives. Praying together is important, not just for what we need, or for those we care about, but also for direction, for wisdom, for boldness to be obedient even when such obedience is difficult or puts us in opposition to culture or government or social norms. We find strength in our fellowship together. It is as we pray together, eat together, work together, and even play together, that relationships are formed that can sustain us, encourage us, and even teach us as we learn together what it means to follow Jesus in life.

We claim that reconciliation is the center of our work. Here, too, we look to Jesus and God’s Spirit that called all nations to worship, that broke dividing walls between Jew and Gentile, male and female. In our fellowship here, we proclaim that God’s table is open to everyone, whether they are white or brown or black, whether they are male or female, straight or gay, documented or undocumented. In Christ all dividing walls are broken down. That is the reality that we must live into. That is part of the reconciling work of Christ who reconciled us to God. This Christ also reconciles us to each other. When we meet opposition, we are called to pray for our enemies. We are told to forgive instead of seeking vengeance. We are asked to put things right as much as we are able. We treat others with kindness, showing mercy. Jesus said that people will know we are his followers by our love for each other.

After the apostles were flogged and dismissed by the council, they left rejoicing. Acts 5:47 reports that “every day, in the temple and at home, they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.” As we go about our daily lives, whether at home or work or church or anywhere, may we, also, live and speak in ways that witness to Jesus as the center of our lives, our Savior and Lord.