

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Acts 5:27-32
SERMON TITLE: Disobeying Orders

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from the book of Acts 5:27-32. Following the event of that first Easter Sunday and in the aftermath of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost, Peter and the apostles were teaching and healing at the temple in Jerusalem with great success. The Sadducees, the leaders of the temple, had them arrested. An angel set the apostles free from prison so that they could resume their work in the temple. Again, they were arrested—and here is where this morning's story begins. Listen for the word of God.

I can't help but wonder: If we had been counted among the apostles in Jerusalem after that first Easter Sunday and in the aftermath of Pentecost; if we had been performing signs and wonders among the people; if we had witnessed to the good news of Jesus Christ while standing in the temple with people responding positively to our message in great numbers; and if we had been given strict orders to stop what we were doing under threat of arrest and imprisonment or worse—what would we have done? Obeyed orders or disobeyed orders? Would we have joined Peter and the other apostles in their rejoinder to the Jewish council, *We must obey God rather than any human authority*—or not?

Now I know that some of you here this morning might expect me to say as a pastor, *Well, of course, I would obey God rather than any human authority.* But the truth is, I'm not so sure that's how I would have responded. I'm the kind of person that doesn't want to get into trouble. I'm very reluctant to go against human authority. I want people to like me. I don't want to be thrown in to jail—even if it's for the sake of the gospel. If I think that speaking the name of Jesus is going to get me into serious trouble, I'm probably going to keep my mouth shut.

After all, my father and mother worked very hard to make me obedient to human authority. If I disobeyed them, I usually got punished. I was taught to respect the law and listen to people in authority. I learned at home and at church that God is a God of law and order.

I was a teenager through most of the 1960s and a college student in the early 1970s. I tremble to think what my folks would have done if I had challenged the status quo and their authority by joining a civil rights demonstration or a public protest for peace—all for the sake of my understanding of the gospel. The subtle message I got from them was that if I associated with people they identified as trouble-makers—then I would no longer be welcomed in my parent's home.

Which reminds me: I'll never forget my first time to vote in a presidential election. It was 1972. I was 20 years old. I made the mistake of telling my dad that I was considering voting for George McGovern. I thought dad was going to have a heart attack right there on the spot. He ordered me to vote for Richard Nixon. And then I blew up. It was not a pretty sight. But when it actually came time to vote, do you know who I voted for? Richard Nixon. You can decide for yourself if this was a good choice or a bad choice—the point I'm making is that the choice itself was influenced by my need to obey human authority—namely, my father's command.

So through the years, I've taken all of this stuff and internalized it so that now, the *human authority* I contend with the most in struggling to obey God is not someone *out* there—it's me and what has become my own inclination to play it safe—to avoid risk—to do what I'm told by people in authority regardless of what God's will may be in the situation.

But at the same time, I hear the gospel call to holy boldness. There is a part of me that wants to obey God above all else, no matter what the cost. And I know that the only way for me

to move beyond the obedience to human authority that I was taught so well and that has become such a big part of my life—is to follow Jesus Christ and to say yes to the power of God’s Spirit at work within me.

But it’s hard for me to do. My resistance is great. So I hold fast to this old story from the book of Acts. I want it to keep working on me—to keep challenging me—to keep pushing me—to become kind of follower of Jesus Christ that I say I want to be.

And I value the witness of others who have put everything on the line to obey God rather than human authorities. For example: In the second century of the common era, Bishop Polycarp was commanded by Roman authorities to renounce Christ and worship Caesar, he refused and was burned alive at 86 years of age.¹

John Wesley, the man who founded Methodism in 18th century England, wrote these entries in his diary: *Sunday, A. M., May 5, Preached in St. Anne’s. Was asked not to come back anymore. Sunday, P. M., May 5, Preached in St. John’s. Deacons said, “Get out and stay out.” Sunday A. M., May 12, Preached in St. Jude’s. Can’t go back there either. Sunday, A. M. May 19, Preached in St. Somebody Else’s. Deacons called special meeting and said I couldn’t return. Sunday, P. M., May 19, Preached on street. Kicked off street. Sunday, A. M., May 26, Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service. Sunday, A. M., June 2, Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway. Sunday, P. M., June 2, Afternoon, preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me.*²

¹ Based on a text from Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers* cited in *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*.

² "Sermon Illustrations." *Locusts and Wild Honey*. Web. 20 Apr. 2010.
<<http://elbourne.org/sermons/index.mv?illustration+1639>>.

During the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s in our country, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was vilified, beaten, imprisoned, and threatened with death. His house was firebombed and in 1968, he was assassinated.

At one point in his ministry, having received a phone call laced with racial hatred and threats to kill him and his family, Dr. King had reached his breaking point. He prayed an anguished prayer: “Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage.” At that moment, Dr. King said that he heard an inner voice saying to him: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.”³ It was enough to keep him going.

Not too many years ago, Shane Claiborne and some of his Christian friends at Eastern University, a Christian school near Philadelphia, heard about a group of homeless families who were living in an abandoned church in the poverty-stricken neighborhood of Kensington. The church had given the families forty-eight hours to get out or face arrest.

Shane and his friends went to the church and checked out the situation. They returned to the campus and mobilized support for the families. As the deadline for eviction drew near, dozens of students from the University poured into the church. They told the families: ***“If they come for you, they’ll have to take us too.”***

Well, the eviction never happened. Over weeks and months, the student witness at the church continued. The church hierarchy and city officials were challenged at each step along the way as they tried to remove these families from ***God’s house***. In the end, as a result of the press

³ Yancey, Philip. *Soul Survivor: How Thirteen Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive the Church*. New York: Galilee/Doubleday, 2003. Print.

coverage generated by this act of obedience to God rather than human authorities, many of the homeless families received decent housing from the city and from donations of homes made by the public.⁴

So what would we have done in these situations? Would we have obeyed God or the human authorities? What about now at First United Methodist Church, Pflugerville? Are there ways in which our aversion to risk—our resistance to disobeying orders—to stirring up trouble—interferes with our mission of bearing witness to Jesus Christ? What are the obstacles in our own hearts that stand in the way? I leave you to ponder the questions.

⁴ Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006, 55f. Print.