

Theme: Dealing with the authorities

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, the followers of your son were commissioned to spread the good news of Jesus Christ: may we be inspired by the example of their loyalty to you and him even in the face of persecution, through our leader, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I don't know how many of you saw the movie, "Weekend at Bernie's." It's about two kids being at their boss' house when he dies. To avoid canceling the weekend party at the boss' house, they put sunglasses on him and everyone thought he was still alive.

Sometimes, life imitates art, if "Weekend at Bernie's" can be considered art. A week ago Saturday, Holy Saturday, two women drove 35 miles from Oldham, near Manchester, to the Liverpool John Lennon airport. They had a traveling companion – a 91 year old relative. Only the old man was dead. Oh, and three of his grandchildren were in the cab, too.

The women managed to get the old guy into a wheelchair and proceeded to the security line at the airport. They put sunglasses on him. They told the staff that he was unsteady on his feet and very sleepy, *really* sleepy.

The security people got suspicious. Unlike "Weekend at Bernie's," they didn't buy the dead person with sunglasses ploy. The man's wife and step-daughter were arrested and charged with failure to report a death.

Willi Jarant was a native of Germany and the women are suspected of trying to avoid a 3,000 pound fee to get him to Berlin for a funeral. The women claim that he was alive in the cab. A hearing is scheduled for June 1. There is no word on funeral arrangements.

There are definitely two versions of what happened. But the two women are in a tough place to defend their actions. Dealing with the authorities will be difficult for them.

For years I've preached about doubting Thomas on the Second Sunday of Easter. This year it is time for a change of pace.

What happens in Acts before our reading this morning is curious and puts our reading into context. The apostles were teaching at the temple, which of course, upset the religious authorities. Jesus' execution was supposed to end his teachings and the movement, but it doesn't seem to be working. The authorities have the apostles arrested and warn them to stop preaching about Jesus at the temple or anywhere else for that matter.

They didn't listen to the religious authorities. They listened to another authority. So, the authorities order the apostles to be arrested and imprisoned. That's when an angel showed up. The angel releases the apostles and tells them to get back to the temple and resume preaching about Jesus.

Well, the authorities order the prisoners to be brought before them and are told they aren't in the prison. Then someone tells them that they're back at the temple doing what landed them in jail in the first place! So they have them arrested, again.

They are brought back to the council. Now I would think that the first thing the council would want to know is how they got out of jail. But they never ask that question. How did they unlock their cell doors? How did they get past the guards without them ever seeing them?

No, they ask why they went back to the temple doing what they were told not to do. And an extra charge was leveled against them for blaming the religious authorities for Jesus' death. We seem to have two versions of history trying to be written here: one where the authorities arrest Jesus and hand him over to Pilate and one where the authorities had nothing to do with it.

Peter and the apostles reject their authority in place of God's authority. We remember this incident, because Luke records it for us. But we are presented with a problem. And that is, when God speaks to someone to disobey the local authorities, is the person truly following God or is the person following some other voice? Luke is explicit. An angel orders them to preach about Jesus. But how do we even recognize an angel, anyway?

Some people who claim to be pro-life have no qualms killing abortion providers. I guess life is not all that sacred after all. Some preachers tell people that God wants them to be rich. Money is finite. The money must come from someone else so I guess God wants someone else to be poor. That seems to be Wall Street's philosophy, too.

The church has accepted the validity of God's actions of the apostles by accepting Luke's writings in Acts. The community of believers has affirmed that the apostle's actions were indeed initiated by God. *This* is how we determine messages from God. The community, the church, through the Holy Spirit affirms God's messages.

The apostles refute the feigned innocence of the council. They accuse them to their faces that they had Jesus killed. But it was the God of their ancestors who raised Jesus to life. The message of Christians is affirmed. The God of the Jews, the God of the Hebrews, the God of the religious authorities, and the God of the apostles raised Jesus to life. When the apostles said "our ancestors," they meant the council's ancestors, too. To reject the apostles, the authorities have to reject their God.

To say this is a religious dispute may be an understatement. This portion of Acts is not an excuse for anti-Semitism. This is a contest between the religious leaders of the Jews and the religious leaders of the Christians, only they are not even Christians yet. It is too early in the church's history. This is a dispute for the heart of Judaism. Will Jews accept Jesus as part of their religion or not. It turns out that Jesus' followers had to go their own way apart from their Jewish heritage.

God raised Jesus to life. God raised Jesus to Glory. God raised Jesus to God's right side. This was done so that Israel would repent and be forgiven of their sins. The apostles testify to this truth. The Holy Spirit testifies to this truth.

When people are placed in positions of authority, they have a hard time hearing views different from their own. They tend to lash out using the power they have. In religious disputes, both sides claim to have God on their side. At times, they can't both be right. Time often tells us who was really right. Community discernment can be very lengthy.

That is like our current dispute over human sexuality. Only time will tell which religious authorities are in the right. The Holy Spirit takes her time.

What we don't hear next is the rest of the story. The council is, predictably, enraged and calls for their executions. But a calmer voice is heard in the council and their lives are spared. The council is told that time will tell them if what the apostles are doing is from God.

When we deal with people in authority, where do we draw the line in the sand? At what point in a sermon do I stop preaching and start meddling? How can I challenge you without offending you – creating an opportunity for change? How do you decide to follow God's ways in secular situations – in the workplace, the volunteer organizations, the government? When do you decide to challenge the religious authorities?

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, we give thanks for those with the gift of steadfastness in the face of opposition, especially when the opposition is from those in authority; let your will be done on earth as well as in heaven, through Jesus Christ our lord, who is the source of our spiritual strength. Amen.

[Avril Ormsby, with editing by Steve Addison, of Reuters contributed to this sermon.]

Text: **Acts 5:27–32** (NRSV)

<sup>27</sup> When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,<sup>c</sup> yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.<sup>d</sup> <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>c</sup> Other ancient authorities read *Did we not give you strict orders not to teach in this name?*

<sup>d</sup> *Gk than men*

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 5:27–32). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.