

The Mission First

Second Sunday of Easter; Series C

Acts 5:12-20

If you attend one of their public ceremonies you will likely hear, from memory, the words shouted proudly and dutifully. It is the U.S. Army's Soldier's Creed. Its current version is a standard that all U.S. Army personnel are required to memorize and encouraged to live by. The fourth line in this Creed summarizes our reading from the Book of Acts: "I will always put the mission first."

Jesus rose from the dead, appeared to his disciples and over five hundred witnesses (1 Cor 15:6), and after 40 days, ascended into heaven. But not before he commissioned his soldiers. He gathered the eleven disciples together as it is recorded at the end of the Gospel of Matthew and in the beginning of the Book of Acts, and he gave them the mission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20). At the beginning of the Book of Acts, the writer, St. Luke recalls the ascension of Jesus and recounts these words of Jesus to the eleven: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The mission is given. Jesus calls his eleven disciples to be the Apostles, or "sent ones," and gives them the very authority and power of God himself to carry out the mission. They go forth with the charge to put the mission first.

Jesus has risen from the dead and appeared to his disciples. He commissioned them to preach repentance and to baptize all nations for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). He sent them to "all the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) to teach the news of Jesus' death and resurrection. And they actually have success! They are faithful to the mission and we read in different places in the Book of Acts that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Elsewhere we read that "many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand" (Acts 4:4). Again, in our reading this morning from Acts we hear, "And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women" (Acts 5:14). God blesses his Word and brings success to the mission of the Apostles.

The Apostles are faithful to the message and mission that the Lord had given them to do. And they meet resistance while doing their work. This should be expected, though. How often it is the case from our own experience that we meet great resistance when we pledge to speak the truth and carry out honest deeds and actions. The Apostles are speaking the Gospel of Jesus Christ and carrying forth the message of the Gospel. We know the resistance that Jesus met. He tells his disciples that they too must carry his cross if they are to be faithful and follow him.

In the Book of Acts we learn that the Apostles met great resistance for doing the Lord's work faithfully. The priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees were greatly annoyed because Peter and John were teaching and proclaiming Jesus and the message of the resurrection. And so they arrested them (Acts 4:3). Stephen, a servant of the Lord and deacon in the early Church was stoned to death after proclaiming the Gospel to the high priest and the religious leaders (Acts 7:54-60). In our reading this morning, the apostles were arrested and put in prison because the high priest and the

Sadducees who were with them were filled with jealousy (Acts 5:17). They saw the success and popularity of the Apostles and so imprisoned them. Great resistance meets God's servants when they put the mission first. It was true then and it is true today.

But God would have the mission come first. He would not have his Apostles behind locked bars, unable to go forth and be his sent ones. And so we heard that God released them. He sent an Angel of the Lord to open the prison doors and bring the Apostles out. He freed them and brought them out of the way of harm and danger. Then we read the very next verse: "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). We might think that this is crazy. The Angel of the Lord sent the Apostles back out to do the very same thing that got them into trouble! The Angel sends them back to the very same place where they were arrested! Who in their right mind would obey such an order? Yet, "When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach" (Acts 5:21). The mission comes first!

We are recipients of God's work of grace through Christ. We have heard the message of the Gospel and have come to trust in Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins, for eternal life, and for salvation with God. We too have the privilege to carry forth the mission of salvation. Now, most of us will not do it like the Apostles. That is, many of you will not speak the Gospel publically as a Pastor or a church worker of some sort. But all of you can live each day as those who are truly free in Christ. All of you live in the joy of the resurrection. And as you live out each day you may have opportunities, like the Apostles, to proclaim in words "all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). Putting the mission first!

You will have successes. For, God promises to bless his Word. He tells us that his word "will not return void but will accomplish that which he purposes" (Is 55:11). In the middle of the Book of Acts, we find this verse, "The Word of God grew and it multiplied" (Acts 12:24). Though, you will also have difficulties. The message of the Gospel and the value system of God and his holy, natural Law is counter-cultural and so God, his message, and his messengers meet resistance. When messengers are being faithful, as we witnessed from the Apostles, resistance can be expected.

As you and I give witness to the Gospel in our daily life we will have successes and we will meet resistance. But there is no reason to fear. We believe, live, and speak a Word of life. The Angel of the Lord told the Apostles, ". . . Speak to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). Jesus is the "resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25). He is the "way the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). God in Christ has crucified us and raised us to new life through the power of the water and the holy Word. Where there was a desperate search for identity, God has now called you his own. Where there was insecurity, now there is security as you rest safe in the hand of God through the wounded hands of Christ. Where at one time you did not know meaning to your life, now your life has meaning in the purposes of God. Where there was separation from God, now there is unity. Where there was the certainty of eternal death, now there is the guarantee of eternal life. Where you had no hope, now you have hope and joy in abundance.

Now you are united to the mission of God and his plan to renew not only your life and others, but to renew the heavens and the earth. So go forth with the power of the very one who crushed suffering and death and the power of Satan and all his enemies for you. Go forth with boldness to share your hope. God put you first. You were part of his mission. By the grace and help of God and in his power and authority, may you put his mission first! Amen.