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For the Sake of the Name

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Acts 5:27-42

²⁷ When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸ 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.’ ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.’

³³ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. ³⁵ Then he said to them, ‘Fellow-Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. ³⁶ For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!’

They were convinced by him, ⁴⁰ and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name. ⁴² And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

Peter and the other apostles are in big trouble with the Jewish Council for a second time. They’d now been arrested twice, escaped jail, caught again – doing exactly what they’d been arrested for in the first place: preaching about Jesus. This time they were ordered, “Do NOT preach in HIS name any more!” The council will not even say the name. Then they were beaten and sent on their way. Luke says they rejoiced at being found worthy to suffer as Christ himself had suffered – meaning, specifically: jailed, questioned, and flogged.

Reading about the process of flogging, I remember last fall when I cut my finger. How much it bled and how much pain medicine I got for *six stitches*.

The whip for flogging was called a flagrum – a short-handled instrument with two or three long leather straps, each strap with a lead ball or sheep bone tied to the ends for weights. The leather split flesh; the weights inflicted contusions. Thirty-nine strikes across the torso and legs. Arms were tied above the head so they weren't usually struck.

People sometimes died of flogging, either from bleeding to death or infection. Too much information? I don't think so, because I want you to have the picture in your head, to see exactly what they rejoiced about. Because here is the original point of comparison for Christians who complain that their religious liberty is being threatened. When they were threatened, rather than lobby for extra legislative protection, the apostles went right back and did again as they believed Jesus had commanded them: to go and tell what they had seen and heard of the risen Christ.

And here, in Acts 5, their preaching was so rough. It was without strategy. . . and it was wildly effective. Acts chapter 4 says that 5000 people heard and came to faith in Christ in a single day. Which was the problem – for the world, that is.

The world around them, Israel, could not afford rogue groups of 5000 people turning a no-name, countryside rabbi into a martyr of Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire. And Rome would certainly not mark the difference between Jesus and Israel proper, not with crowds of thousands around the Jerusalem temple saying and praising his name.

The more effective the early church was in obeying Jesus' commandment to go and tell, the greater the problem the church was – for the world – leaving me to wonder if the inverse is also true? If the less faithful the church is to Jesus' directive, the less a problem the church is to the world? It is, at least, worth considering.

Peter and the apostles were not lobbyists. They sought no favors, no special permission, none of the tax breaks or legal variances American clergy and churches enjoy today. Our congregation owns about \$1 million worth of property, and we pay no property tax. I pay way less income tax than you. We are not required to abide by the American Disabilities Act when we build, nor Equal Opportunity laws when we hire clergy.

The apostles did not provoke or antagonize or demonize other people groups and then expect the government to protect them. They simply went to the place where people gather to learn of God and told what they knew of God in Christ Jesus – the truth which they had seen and heard and felt with their own eyes and ears and hearts. They witnessed to people who had freely chosen to hear a witness.

And when they got in trouble for it, did they say, “hey, that's not fair!” No. Did they insist on their rights? No. Did they march off to jail quietly as Jesus had? Yes. Twice. And when they were questioned, what did they say? “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” Which, Luke said, made the people listening really, really angry.

Why? Remember who they were talking to? Priests – God’s Jewish reps in Jerusalem. They took it personally. Verse 33 says they were enraged and wanted to kill the apostles. But a wise and respected Jewish leader named Gamaliel was able to talk the others down off that ledge, and they settled for warnings and floggings all around.

And still. And still. Did the apostles protest? Nope. Did they insist on their own rights? No. What did they do? They rejoiced. Their bodies were bloody and broken, but their spirits rejoiced. The closest I can imagine to such an experience is delivering two babies without any pain medicine. It hurt so much I thought I might die, but then it was over and I got a baby.

The apostles didn’t get a baby. Their joy was in being counted worthy to suffer as Christ had suffered. The church I know doesn't care for such things. In my campus ministry years “suffering for Christ” referred to: having to listen to an agnostic professor; not being allowed to hand out religious preference cards at freshman orientation. In parish ministry I don't know if I've heard it five times in 22 years.

I do remember Laura Hall's daddy, being so disappointed and yet so faithful after his second stroke, when he told his pastor, “Well, if the Lord wants me to lay here I guess I'll just lay here.” He was such an awfully good sport about it.

We are a fortunate church. Protected speech is a gift, a blessing, if only the church could again find her voice RAISED – not in judgy criticism of the world, but rather in humble, joyful witness of what God has done for us in the risen Christ. Not in preachy, churchy, Bible talk (unless that’s the way you always talk), but in the everyday language of our everyday lives. The specific, ordinary, life-giving, game-changing, joy-filled ways God sustains us day in and day out. That is the Risen Christ in you, friends. And you in Him.

It's OK if it's rough and unrehearsed. It might be even better like that. If you think you haven't got anything to say, then I suspect your bar may be too high. You have health enough to be here. You have a home. You have a community. You have people who love you in this very room. People waiting and ready to help you when you have trouble. You have nothing to fear in this world: no government, no demon, no force of nature which can separate you from God.

We learn to tell it, friends, by learning to live it. Beginning here. Beginning now.

Would you pray with me?