

April 16, 2023 – Acts 5:29-42

Two weeks ago, on Palm Sunday, I mentioned a basic premise of Biblical interpretation: the person who looks like a villain probably is a villain. The person who looks like the hero probably is the hero. The Bible doesn't have a lot of unexpected twists, where the hero turns out to be the villain or a villain turns out to be a hero. It's not a novel written to entertain us in that way. It's a factual record of events. And real life just doesn't often surprise us in that way.

But every once in a while, we come across a person in the Bible whose motives we just don't really know for sure. Are they a villain or are they a hero? Are they working against God's kingdom or are they working to further God's Kingdom? It's rare, but it does happen.

And the written nature of the Bible makes it all the more complicated to discern. Because as anyone who has ever written a letter, an email, a text, or tried to have a conversation over social media knows all too well, written words don't always clearly convey emotion. And all we have in the Bible is a written account.

And so there are times when we do our best to hear the other person's voice in our heads. Times when we need to infer things like voice inflection and facial expressions and body language. And this is especially true of Gamaliel's speech in our First Lesson:

*“Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”*

My gut reaction, of course, is to view these as words of doubt. Disbelief. Even manipulation and malice. This is the Sanhedrin, after all. These are the same Pharisees and chief priests who, just a few weeks prior, arrested Jesus, put him through a kangaroo court, mocked him, spit on him, beat him, and ultimately crucified him.

We often speak of our shared guilt in Jesus' crucifixion. Our sins are the reason Jesus died on the cross. And that's very true. But here, when Peter points his finger at them and says, *“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.”* He's being far more literal.

These are the actual men who sentenced Jesus to death. These are actual the men who stood before Pilate and said, “He deserves to die.” These are the actual men who stirred up the crowd to cry out, “Crucify him,” over and over again. And Gamaliel is one of them.

So I do hesitate to give him the benefit of the doubt. Because at first glance it sounds an awful lot like he's just picking up where the Sanhedrin left off. Jesus was a nobody. His disciples are just a bunch of crazy, stupid fanatics. Leave them alone and they'll just go away. We did the right thing. We cut off the head. Now we just wait for the body to die. End of story.

That's how we could take it. And yet... I'm not so sure. Because I have to believe that the disciples aren't the only ones who have been changed by Jesus' resurrection. The whole world has been changed by it. And ever more so each day that goes by.

And the Sanhedrin has to know about this. You don't hear five hundred people running around saying, “Jesus is risen from the dead and we have seen him!” without getting at least a little curious. You don't hear thousands of people talking about how an ordinary fisherman like Peter has been given power to heal the paralyzed without doing a little investigating.

Whatever they felt about Jesus, they can't just sit back and say, “Well, he's dead now, so we can move on with our lives.” Because it doesn't look much like he's dead and it doesn't seem like they are moving on with their lives at all. If anything, they are just as obsessed with destroying Jesus ministry as they ever were.

So maybe there's less doubt in these words than we at first wanted to admit. Maybe Gamaliel really is considering the possibility that they are opposing God. Maybe Gamaliel is considering the very real, very frightening possibility that they have been opposing God all along.

All of their arguments with Jesus. All of their doubts about his ministry. All of their scorn thrown at him. All of their violence against him. Maybe they've been fighting on the wrong side this entire time.

So Gamaliel comes up with a solution. He comes up with a solution that, in fact, the Pharisees should have applied years ago to Jesus himself. But I guess better late than never. The solution is to wait. Wait and watch. Wait and listen. Wait and find out what God does with these people who claim to be his disciples.

And that's what they do. The Sanhedrin waits. And the city of Jerusalem waits. And the entire Roman world waits. And the entire world today waits. Because, you see, that's where we come into the story.

Gamaliel's challenge still stands. And it's been repeated by the entire unbelieving world around us. If our plan, if our undertakings are of human origin, they will fail. And everyone will believe that the church is a fraud. But if our plan and undertakings are from God, then no one can stop us. And if they try, they won't be opposing us. They'll be opposing God almighty.

It's a daunting proposition. But an exciting one too. Because Peter is right. We must obey God, rather than men. What we do here, in this church, must be guided by God's Word. What we do here must be the plan, the will of God. And what we do here must be Godly undertakings.

And when it's not, we fail. We fail God. We fail the Church. And we fail a world that's waiting for us to fail so that they know who we are and where we come from. Cheering for us to fail sometimes, so that they can all the more easily reject our message.

And when that happens, it hurts. It should hurt. It's supposed to hurt. That's how we know we were wrong. That's how we know that we must repent, return to God's Word, and start again.

But at the same time, even when those failures happens – and they will happen – we are still, fundamentally, from God. By faith in God's Word and baptism by His Spirit, we are still His. And for the two thousand years since Gamaliel first issued that challenge to us, the church has been filled with sinful people who don't always have a Godly plan and don't always pursue Godly undertakings.

In 300AD, it was Arius fighting Athanasius. In 1500AD, it was the pope fighting Luther. Today, it's all manner of corrupt pastors, priests, and spiritual leaders. Men who use God's Word to make themselves rich. Who abuse their power for perversion or control. There are plenty of sinners in God's Church.

And yet, His Church is still here. And everyone who has ever tried to oppose it has found himself opposing God. Because God preserves His Church and all the many sinners within it.

God's Church does not exist as a place for perfect people to do perfect things. It exists as a place for a perfect God to do perfect things using imperfect people. It exists as a place for His Spirit to reside, where sins are forgiven and peace is proclaimed through the breaking of bread and the washing of rebirth. It exists as a place for people to find the risen Lord, even in the midst of all their doubts and disbelief. God's Church exists for sinners. Like you and me.

I don't know whether the disciples who stood in front of Gamaliel that day knew any better than I do what he meant by those words. Did he mean what he said? Did he honestly care about whether or not they were from God? Were these words that he spoke the beginning of new faith? I don't know.

But I do know this. Whether he intended it or not, the challenge still stands. It stood for the disciples, who went out from that council with an order not to speak one word about Jesus, and then promptly proclaimed the good news of the resurrection. And it still stands for us. We who are still witnesses of these things. We must obey God rather than men. Because we are still and ever shall be from God. Amen.