

Second Sunday of Easter

Obeying God, or Obeying Ourselves?

Acts 5:27-32

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Analysis by Matthew DeLoera

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 Savior 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."



Saint Paul delivering Areopagus Sermon By [Raphael](#) – Royal Collection of the United Kingdom, Public Domain, [Wikipedia](#)

In the glory of his resurrection, Jesus came back to embrace all who denied him, betrayed him, or even crucified him—for the council, for the crowds, and for the apostles. ... Witnessing all this, by faith, we know that Jesus also comes back to embrace a bunch of unrepentant, contentious sinners like us. He will not be deterred.

DIAGNOSIS: We Obey Ourselves

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Acting Up

GROUNDING: The chief priest and temple authorities had

previously arrested and imprisoned the apostles (4:1) and forbidden them to speak of Jesus (4:18). Nevertheless, they preach. They dare to resume preaching in Solomon's Portico (5:12). Their growing body of supporters wisely listen from a distance for fear of reprisal (5:13), as the authorities again drag the apostles to jail (5:18). But this time, an angel of the Lord comes and releases them, and exhorts them to once again go and preach in the temple (5:20). Surprised and vexed, the authorities seize them a third time, and grill them about their disobedience (5:28). But, this harassment isn't surprising. Consider Peter's sermon: "You rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life. ... And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers" (3:14, 17). The line between religion and politics has blurred, so when thousands become enjoined to the cause (4:4), what bars an insurrection? Hence, the authorities avoid violence, "for they were afraid of being stoned by the people" (5:26).

TRACKING: A March 2022 article in The Atlantic, "Why People Are Acting So Weird," observes a surge in violence among Americans, alongside the Covid pandemic: "Early 2021 saw the highest number of unruly passenger incidents ever, according to the FAA." Not only that, but the article also expands: we witness school board meetings erupting in violence, healthcare workers assaulted, murder rates increasing at the highest rates ever, and untold other incivilities rising. So, the article asks, "What on earth is happening? How did Americans go from clapping for healthcare workers to threatening to kill them?"

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Breaking Up

GROUNDING: The temple authorities are easy to name as villains here, and Luke may be correct that they're acting out of unbridled jealousy (5:17) toward the apostles, whether due to

their popularity, miraculous acts of healing, or bold preaching. Though, the crowd of Jesus' followers are equally questionable. After all, the authorities fear being murdered (stoned) by them. Earlier too, they were intimidated from punishing the apostles, "because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened" (4:21). What might have happened if Gamaliel hadn't persuaded the rest of the council to release them and just look the other way (5:38)? What ugliness might have been revealed if they were pushed hard enough?

TRACKING: The Atlantic article poses abundant theories for our apparent loss of civility. With staffing shortages, mask mandates, and inflation, hair triggers catch us by surprise. Where some see mere inconveniences, others see gross threats to their civil rights, worth defending by any means necessary. Spiking gun sales suggest something other than peace in our hearts. And, social isolation has loosened ties between people. "Kids stopped going to school; their parents stopped going to work; parishioners stopped going to church... We're more likely to break rules when our bonds to society are weakened." All told, we seem to be itching for a fight.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): 'Fessing Up

GROUNDING: As St. Paul quotes the Psalmist, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God" (Rom. 3:10, Ps. 14:3). No one escapes suspicion here—not even the apostles. Peter boldly asserts, "We must obey God rather than any human authority", as a seeming stand for religious freedom. But, after the council has the apostles flogged and released, "they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (5:41). Certainly, the apostles are tenacious. But, whether their joy is founded in a truly selfless suffering for the sake of the gospel, or just a sense of self-

serving pride in winning, remains ambiguous.

TRACKING: How often do we assert “we must obey God rather than any human authority,” as license to provoke on purpose, and then relish our self-created victimhood as vindication? Whether demanding prayer in school, manufacturing a war on Christmas, refusing to mask on religious grounds (just Google “wearing a mask is against my religion” and witness endless articles), or untold other issues of contention, our base motive isn’t so much about obeying God. Deep down, we just don’t like being told what to do. We’re defiant and unrepentant about it. But by Peter’s logic, forgiveness of sins sounds impossible without repentance. Of course, some part of us may be convinced that we’re really fighting the “good fight.” We believe a lot of things. But the truth is God is the only and final arbiter of good and right.

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PROGNOSIS: We Obey God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus Embraces Us

GROUNDING: Despite how we might try to dissect motives here, Peter clearly proclaims good news. “God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand ... that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Betrayed by the authorities, his own people, and even his disciples, from the cross Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34). Indeed, Jesus was not surprised by any of these betrayals. Always the bold one, Peter swore, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” Yet, Jesus prophesied, “before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But in the glory of his resurrection, Jesus came back to embrace all who denied him, betrayed him, or even crucified him—for the council, for the crowds, and for the apostles.

CROSSING: Witnessing all this by faith, we know that Jesus also comes back to embrace a bunch of unrepentant, contentious sinners like us. He will not be deterred.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): We Embrace Each Other

GROUNDING: Of course, Peter’s inner motives remain murky. Perhaps he still feels guilty about disappointing Jesus, rejoicing in the opportunity to prove loyalty by “suffering dishonor for the sake of the name.” (5:41) Nevertheless, he testifies, “we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” Filled with the Holy Spirit, they cannot help themselves but to broadcast the good news of Jesus’ resurrection and forgiveness for all the

world to hear, despite the suffering of arrests and physical assaults. Jesus' truth will be made known, unburdening consciences and unleashing the new creation by a Word. And, the Holy Spirit continues to abide with them and spur them onward.

CROSSING: In the heat of our incivility, it's easy to write each other off as foregone conclusions, hopelessly bound by our wills and incapable of redemption. But faith's wisdom recognizes these inner demons or motives that drive folks to lash out. The Atlantic article suggests that "someone who may have lost a job, a loved one, or a friend to the pandemic might be pushed over the edge by an innocuous request." This rudeness can be contagious—too often we pass on what we receive. But, by the Holy Spirit, we suffer others' slings and arrows to stop the cycle. Instead, we seek to get close enough to glimpse others' suffering masked by their strife—to see them as the children of God whom Jesus came to embrace.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Community is Created

GROUNDING: As the apostles persisted, "yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women" (5:14). Jesus' word created a community, and "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul... everything they owned was held in common" (4:32).

CROSSING: The Atlantic article ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that as masks come off, people resume normal gatherings, and kids return to school, some of our antisocial behavior will loosen its grip. But, by faith we witness something more profound—the power of God (again) drawing us back together into the beloved community, where God's hand will stretch out to heal (4:30), and where "signs and wonders" (5:12) of mercy and compassion will be done.