

Acts 5:27-42

Now, I know that we just had Easter, and we don't celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit in Pentecost until May 23, but in the text for today, the Holy Spirit has already paid a visit to the Apostles, and they are busy carrying out Jesus' commandment to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and beyond. In fact, they are so earnest in their preaching and teaching and healing, that the high priest and the Sadducees have arrested them. God apparently has other plans, so an angel frees them from jail and orders them to continue preaching in the Temple Courts. The Council of chief priests and elders, also called the Sanhedrin, yes, the same one that tried Jesus, had to go re-arrest the apostles, though the text said that they did so without violence because they were afraid of being attacked by the Jewish people there. That's where we are. Listen now for the Word of God.

When they had brought [the apostles],
they had them stand before the Council.
The high priest questioned them, 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.

But Peter and the apostles answered,
“We must obey God rather than any human authority.
The god of our ancestors raised up Jesus,
whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.
God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior
that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.
And we are witnesses to these things,
and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

³³When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church: **Thanks be to God.**

I was raised in a household where “playing Devil’s Advocate” was the primary method of education, at least when my mom was the teacher. Whenever I had an opinion or had to make a decision and was leaning a certain way, she would argue the other side. The upside, was that I learned to make reasoned arguments and I learned to always try to think about an issue from multiple perspectives. What I realize now that I didn’t as a teenager, is how much of my mom’s “taking the other side” was for my benefit and out of her deep love and respect for me, and not proof that her mission in life was to always oppose me. It’s easy to think that sometimes about members of your family.

Given my training in playing Devil’s Advocate and my current job, maybe it should come as no surprise that my first instinct after hearing this speech by the apostles was to think about what it must have been like to be a temple priest in the midst of all this. I mean, can you imagine if a group of Christians had gathered on our steps this morning and all throughout worship and after were holding signs and shouting and trying to convince people as they left worship that our preaching and worship were an abomination to the gospel, and that God had told them to come and tell us so. I don’t know if I’d be the first one to call the police, but I sure would be relieved when they came.

It’s pretty clear whose side the Apostles think God is on here—they’re not exactly subtle about it: The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom YOU killed...that he might give repentance to Israel...hint, hint...and we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey God—in other words, we are the obedient ones and you are not.

Frankly, I’m not surprised that the members of the council are enraged. It sounds much more like a self-righteous accusation than an invitation to hear the good news or a testimony about how one’s own life has been transformed. In fact, when I first read the passage for today, I was horrified at what it seemed to be modeling in terms of Christian evangelism, and at how Anti-Semitic the text sounded. How ironic, I thought, that this text comes to us on Holocaust Remembrance

Sunday—here seems to be the foundation for centuries of Christians accusing Jews of deicide, for centuries of Christians claiming to have replaced Jews as the truly obedient chosen people of God.

In my distress, I paid a visit to Rabbi Ilyse at the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, and she encouraged me to really take seriously the historical context. First of all, Acts was written ten to twenty years after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, which was THE place where God resided and the center of Jewish prayer and worship. It was a time when Judaism was forced to undergo a major shift in the way it conceived of faithfulness and worship.

And as you might imagine, there were a number of groups within Judaism with different ideas of how that shift should occur. One of those groups was the Pharisees. This is the group that ultimately proved persuasive among the majority of Jews, and their teachings became the foundation of what we know today as Rabbinical Judaism. A second group was the Sadducees, who would be closer to our modern day literalists than the Pharisees were. Finally, there were the Jews like Peter and the apostles who had been followers of Jesus and had come to believe that he was the Son of God. Much of the hostile rhetoric in the New Testament against the Pharisees and the Sadducees, sometimes lumped together as “the Jews,” was born in this context of various Jewish groups campaigning for the heart and soul of Judaism at this crucial juncture in history.

The point is that at the time that the gospels were written this was an internal debate—a family dispute, if you will—and the group of Jews that came to be known as Christians began with the least amount of power. That is very different from our context today, in which Christianity for a long time has been synonymous with Western imperialism and has done great harm and violence to Jews and people of other faiths in the name of Jesus. But at this time, the Christians were the ones being arrested, flogged, and stoned—at this time, they weren’t yet doing those things to anyone else.

In my eagerness to play Devil's Advocate to my Christian bias, I almost forgot to play devil's advocate to my liberal bias. The apostles after all were not addressing all Jewish people—they themselves were Jews—they were addressing the Sanhedrin, the very same council that had so very recently tried Jesus and handed him over to be crucified. (9)

However arrogant and self-righteous, accusatory, inflammatory and a poor example of evangelism I might find the words of the apostles, they are not intended to be anti-Semitic, even if they were used for those ends later by Christian interpreters. And, to their credit, they are trying to be obedient to divine instruction from both Jesus and an Angel of the Lord. In fact, the Presbyterian Church at least would probably benefit from a little more of their zeal and enthusiasm.

But what do we do when the experience of God that has transformed us seems incompatible with the faith of others and perhaps even deeply offensive to neighbors whom we are also called to respect and even to love. What do we do when the truths that someone else holds dear challenge our beliefs about who God is and how God works in the world?

The lectionary ends with the Apostles' speech, but I propose that we keep listening for the Word of God, not just in the mouths of the Apostles, but in the mouth of the Pharisee, yes, the ones that we have so long stereotyped as being legalistic and narrow—But listen now... for the Word of God.

Acts 5:33-42

³³When [the council] heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill [the apostles].

³⁴But 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.

³⁵Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men.

³⁶For 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.

³⁷After 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.

³⁸So 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; ³⁹but 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,

⁴⁰and 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.

⁴¹As they left the council, [the apostles] rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.

⁴²And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Christ.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church: **Thanks be to God.**

Earlier this year, the session was visited by representatives of the Presbytery’s Evangelism Committee, who clearly didn’t do their research about Brown Memorial. After a good while of patient listening, one of our elders asked, “Well, MY closest friends and colleagues—one is Muslim and the other is Hindu. Are you really saying that I should be trying to invite them to church?”

Two things became immediately and painfully obvious.

One was that the man from the evangelism committee didn’t know much about either Islam or Hinduism. The second was that he was making the assumption that the goal of all interfaith encounters was conversion to Christianity.

It's one thing to try to convert people of other faiths, and I doubt that most of us would take that approach to evangelism. I think most of us think more along the lines of live and let live. To some extent, that's what Gamaliel is arguing for. He is not threatened by the apostles, because he does not doubt for a minute that God is in charge and nobody else. And if God is not with these disciples, then their movement will eventually fail.

But what if we took Gamaliel's premise, that God has the power and freedom to surprise us, to its logical conclusion, and applied it to other faiths today? What if our trust in God's sovereignty is so radical that we are willing to entertain the notion that the growth of Islam might be "of God." Or perhaps even more radical, that the growth of conservative Christian Churches might have the Holy Spirit's fingerprints on it.

I don't mean to say that survival or popularity proves God's hand—evil and falsehood can be disturbingly persistent as well. Take the recent report by the Southern Poverty Law Center that American hate group activity is on the rise—I don't think that's God's doing. What I do think is that a radical trust in God's sovereignty and God's freedom means that we have to be willing to encounter God anywhere, among anybody.

Now, based on that argument, Gamaliel persuaded the council not to kill the apostles, but frankly that's just baby step number one. Because if God really is at work in other faith traditions or even in those parts of our own Christian family with whom we disagree or have become estranged, then it's not just that we don't want to be fighting God. We want to know what God is doing; we want to be part of it.

Obviously the way to open that door is not simply to curb open hostility, nor is it to "keep away from [the other] and leave them alone," as Gamaliel proposes. To truly honor the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ we must engage the other as Jesus did, honestly, passionately, with a willingness to listen to someone tell the whole truth about themselves, and by giving up power and making ourselves vulnerable.

During my visit with Rabbi Ilyse, I learned something very intriguing about Gamaliel. He was the grandson of Rabbi Hillel, the famous Jewish teacher who summed up the law much like Jesus. Gamaliel's grandfather is revered in Jewish tradition for perfecting the art of "Sacred Arguing," a tradition that continues to characterize and enrich Jewish interpretation of scripture. Rabbi Hillel and his colleague Rabbi Shammai were apparently masters of this sacred art, arguing passionately over various interpretations of the law—sometimes one persuaded the other, sometimes they had to agree to disagree for now; always they made sure that their relationship was such that the children of their followers could intermarry.

In one of the supplements to the Jewish oral law called the Mishna, readers are instructed to cultivate the spirit of this Sacred Arguing, preserved in the Talmud. "Make yourself a heart of many rooms," it says, "and bring into it the words of the House of Shammai and the words of Hillel, the words of those who declare unclean and the words of those who declare clean" (Sotah 7:12). Perhaps this tradition of sacred arguing is not so different from what I grew up with. Perhaps I learned something of the art of sacred arguing from my mother.

So why is it that I tend to avoid any potential religious hot topics in my interfaith friendships? In fact, I tend to avoid all Jesus-talk for fear that I might alienate him or that she might think that my friendship is just a underhanded attempt at evangelism.

If I'm really honest, by withholding all talk about Christ and my faith from my friends, I am withholding one of the deepest and truest parts of who I am, and also one part of my life where I feel most vulnerable. If I am truly honest with myself, my reluctance to talk about my faith with my non-Christian friends is more often about my own fear or ambivalence about my faith than it is about my concern for them.

The apostles in this text challenge me to remember that Jesus is not ancillary to my faith, Jesus is central to it. Jesus is what makes interfaith dialogue not only possible but necessary.

If I refuse to engage “the other,” whether in another faith tradition or in my own...if I refuse to engage “the other” in a deep and meaningful way, with my whole self, then I have not followed the example of Christ. It is his example of openness to others, his willingness to make himself vulnerable, his passion for bringing good news and healing to all he encountered, his courage in the face of pain and uncertainty that should inspire me to take those risks. It is his trust in God’s sovereignty, even to the death, that should inspire me to trust God to be with me in these interfaith encounters.

The apostles bring me back to Jesus. The Pharisee reminds me to look for Jesus in the other. Gamaliel reminds me that there is much to be gained by engaging other faiths and even those we disagree with in our own faith family. What could liberal and conservative Christians in America learn from the rabbinic tradition of sacred arguing, where two people can disagree without destroying trust? What can we learn from truly being open to the possibility of God working in and through those with whom we vehemently disagree? A lot, I suspect. And I am so grateful to be part of a community where interfaith dialogue is encouraged, and I’m grateful to groups like the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies who help make the dialogue truly deep and honest.

I wonder if the bigger challenge for us in this community is to engage those within the Christian family who reject our worship style or our theology or our politics. Can we cultivate the same kind of religious sensibility that the Talmud strives for? Can we make ourselves into a heart with many rooms? With the help of the Holy Spirit, I believe that we can.

Children’s Moment

Jesus said, God’s house has many rooms. What can you do if you live in a house with many rooms? What do you think it means to have a heart with many rooms? What are some ways we can welcome our new members?

Sources: Discovering our Common Ground, Exploring our Differences: A Jewish-Christian Conversation; Reclaiming the Center Adult Education Series, Vol. 1, “Encountering Our Sacred Texts,” produced by the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies (www.icjs.org) in 2009, especially the introduction, and Lessons IV, V, and VII. Special thanks to Rabbi Ilyse Kramer for her helpful conversation and sharing of resources.