

## Summon the Next Witness

Text: Acts 5:27-32

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Four years ago the Plains Bluff New York High School found itself embroiled in a community crisis. The Principal had been inviting different people to lead the Pledge of Allegiance over the school's PA system each morning. During National Foreign Language week, he decided that it would be good to invite students who speak different languages to lead the Pledge in their language. That way students could learn, he said, that people "who speak other languages still pledge to salute this great country."

On Wednesday the pledge the pledge was led by a student who spoke Arabic. By that afternoon the principal was back on the building-wide PA system apologizing for letting the pledge of allegiance be spoken in Arabic: "We sincerely apologize to any students, staff or community members who found this activity offensive." The following week the NY State Commissioner of Education issued a new ruling: "*From now on, the Pledge of Allegiance in schools throughout the state will be conducted in English-only.*"

It was not a shining moment for our American public-school system.<sup>1</sup> That story still gives me pause. It happened when Obama was President, not Trump. But it was like a bell-weather of what was to come. The commissioner's English-only ruling smacked of the kind of "whites-only" ruling from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Christians, what should pledging our allegiance to Christ, as Lord, look like? English only? White's only? Or does our allegiance demand that we see beyond the expectations of practicing a *safe* religious faith? I cherish these pictures from Easter Sunday at JBC two years ago. I had the privilege of baptizing Yuka and Mike, two young 20-something people professing their allegiance to Christ in baptism. And they both *spoke in tongues* after their baptism. Yuka shared here faith in Christ first in English and then in Japanese. Mike shared his faith in Christ in both English and then in Spanish. I'm not suggesting that we need to become bi-lingual to be good Christians. But what they did was similar to what happened on the Day of Pentecost when the Jesus followers publicly witnessed to their faith—bilingually.

In the 50 days that occurred between Easter Morning and the day of Pentecost, those first followers of Jesus were forced to rethink their faith expectations. Prior to Easter they had been good Jews who believed that pursuing holiness meant being observant with regard to the restrictions of their faith and fulfilling the expectations of their Elders. But the resurrection of Jesus turned those expectation on their head. When they were summoned to the witness stand, God's expectations were that they put aside all the pressure to practice a safe religion and embrace the call to express their witness with redemptive zeal.

And that's my hope for Panther Lake Community Church as you set your hearts and minds toward the celebration of Pentecost that will come 6 Sundays from now. Perhaps its time to ask what the expectation of Christ is when pledge our allegiance to an Easter faith? The Apostle Peter says, "We must obey God rather than men!" Which is to say that we must pursue what Christ calls us to do and be rather than what our culture considers acceptably safe religion.

Let's look at what the claim Peter made before the Sanhedrin means for us today. The council or Sanhedrin was made up of the high priest and his male family members, the ruling

elders, prominent scribes who served as the legal stewards of the court, and selected Sadducees and Pharisees that made up the landed gentry. In the capital city of Jerusalem they were equivalent of our US Supreme Court. They were charged with interpreting and guarding all of Jewish life, custom, and law—all the expectations Jewish leaders had about keeping the faith.

Peter and John had already been arrested for preaching about Jesus once before. That first time they were given a “cease and desist” order to quit preaching blasphemy and sedition! Peter and John responded: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. Nothing can stop us from speaking and teaching about what we have heard and seen.” It was a classic brinksmanship: “You do what you think you have to do and we’ll do what we believe we must do. We’ll see how it goes from there.”

In this reading, they have been arrested a second time, and hauled before the appalled leaders of the Sanhedrin who ask, “Who do you think you are to defy us in this way? You continue to teach in that dead man’s name! And you seem bound and determined to blame us for his execution which was at the hands of the Romans. How dare you? We forbid you to speak of this again.” That’s when Peter says: “We must obey God rather than any human authority!” What Peter sees clearly is these men who say they speak for God—*don’t*.

They speak for themselves.

They speak to maintain the status quo.

They speak as authorities primarily interested in keeping their institutional power intact.

What they do is demand allegiance **to their expectations**, not Christ’s expectations.

Part of living an Easter faith is recognizing those moments when your allegiance is being tested **and stepping up**. Your first reaction will likely be to step back and not look for trouble. Let someone else run with that flag. But Easter faith should never ever let the powers-that-be silence it or subdue it. Easter faith stands up for living faithfully. The only problem is, wouldn’t it be nice if it was always **a clear case of brinksmanship** when we face competing allegiances?

Would it surprise you to know that this passage in Acts 5 is the text the members of Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas use to justify their picketing of funerals in God’s name? They cite it as argument support whenever they are challenged when they picket the funerals of American soldiers killed in action. They defend their actions by claiming, “We must obey God rather than man.” None of us in this room think what they do is either reasonable or something that honors the witness of an Easter faith. **And we groan.**

During the Presidential campaign in 2016 Ms. Nancy Perry, a Georgia middle-school teacher told her students that President Barack Obama was really a Muslim, that he was evil, and that he hated America. “Not only is he not a Christian,” said Ms. Perry, “but any of your parents who support him as President aren’t Christians either.” When some of those student’s parents protested, Ms. Perry offered proof of her claims from the birther arguments she found on the Internet. She counter-charged that she was just trying to challenge her students to “prove their Christianity” by standing up for the like Peter and John did in Acts. She was quite clear she was obeying God in what she taught, not giving in to the pressure of man.<sup>2</sup> **And we groan.**

This problem of choosing between obeying God and obeying human authority isn’t always as clear to Christians as we might wish it would be. Consider the kind of expectations from family and community that Peter and John chose *when they were summoned to the witness*

*stand*. In their day, people likely looked at what Peter and John were doing pretty much the same as how we look at what the Westboro Baptist Church folk are doing; or how we look at what Nancy Perry, that Georgia middle-school teacher did. Peter and John's family, friends, and community members probably just looked at them and then they **groaned**.

Here's the thing. Allegiance to Christ is more clear-cut in hindsight than in the thick of it. So, how can we know that we are being faithful rather than fearful when it's our turn in the witness stand? How do we make sure that it isn't God who is **groaning**?

Scripture provides us with clues that can help us know whether we are being faithful or just fearful when we speak our witness. Look at what Peter says in defense of their witness. He said:

1. You thought you would kill Jesus and end his message, but *the God of our ancestors* raised him from the tomb—**NOT YOU**
2. What you did to silence *Jesus* actually exalted him so that all of Israel can experience forgiveness of sins *through him*—**NOT YOU**.
3. And *we are the witnesses* of this new, Spirit-filled way of faith God made possible—**NOT YOU**.

If you look closely you'll see that their pledge of allegiance names God, then names Jesus, and finally names the Holy Spirit who goes before them when they trust him to lead a counter-cultural, redemptive witness of true observance in the world. These men are claim that a true *Easter faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ demands that our witness will always be testable by whether it is redemptive or protective. And that's a bit scary*. Because it's an important rule of thumb to measure our witness as well. Are we simply supporting a status quo or some version of why I'm right by the way we practice our faith? If so we're just not as outrageous as the Westborro Baptist folk or Ms. Perry. We're still practicing a faith that keeps it safe for folk rather than obeying God. One witness is a **faithful** kind of redemptive **zeal** and the other is just **fearful** kind of **safe** religion.

Pledging our allegiance to live out an Easter faith redemptively will never look like *safe religion*; it will not feel like just fulfilling the expectations of your elders. Our elders will almost always try to caution us **to practice safe religion rather than a costly zeal**.

They mean well.

It's what elders do.

But is that the witness **God** calls forth from us? Is that how **Jesus** would challenge us to live redemptively? Is it following where the **Holy Spirit** is going ahead of us? I have **two stories** that can help us to imagine what practicing a *redemptive zeal* rather than a *safe religion* might look like.

Have you read Anne Tyler's novel *Saint Maybe*? Spoiler alert: it's a parable about **redemptive zeal**. The main character Ian Bedloe tells his older brother, Danny, of his suspicion that Danny's wife is having an affair. Danny is so overwhelmed by this news he recklessly crashes his car and dies in the accident. Danny's wife, Lucy, is so devastated that her husband thought she was unfaithful she overdoses on her sleeping pills—and dies. Two lives are lost because Ian told Danny about ... *his suspicions*. As a result 3 children are left without parents.

The responsibility to care for the children initially falls on Ian's parents, but they have failing health.

When Ian learns that Lucy wasn't having an affair. He becomes overwhelmed with guilt at what he has done and the tragedies it's begotten. He looks for and finds spiritual guidance from Reverend Emmett, the pastor of a small unorthodox, storefront congregation called the Church of the Second Chance. The pastor tells Ian that real repentance needs to be concrete and real. He startles Ian with a suggestion: "Drop out of college and care for your brother's children. That would be a start **at living redemptively.**" Ian is stunned at first, but realizes that he cannot change the past, but he can change the future. So, he quits school, takes up carpentry, and takes responsibility to raise his brother's children.

At one point Ian's good Presbyterian parents become alarmed by his actions. His father demands, "Ian, have you fallen into the hands of some *sect*?"

"No, I haven't," Ian answered. "I have merely discovered a church that makes sense to me, the same as Dober Street Presbyterian makes sense to you and Mom."

"Dober Street didn't ask us to abandon our education," his mother says. "Ofcourse we have nothing against religion; we raised all of you children to be Christians. But *our* church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life."

"Well, maybe it should have," Ian said. "Maybe it should have."<sup>3</sup>

Anne Tyler, the author of *Saint Maybe*, is **not** a professing Christian. But her novel is one of the most powerful Christian testimonies to the gospel you can read. It gives powerful witness to what a redemptive faith should look like in our lives. A colleague of mine at University of Dubuque had the opportunity to ask Tyler why she isn't a Christian when her novel so beautifully tells the truth of the gospel. She told her that most of the Christianity she sees in the Dober Street Presbyterian Church kind of witness. She believes most churches teach that allegiance to Christ is about what you believe, not about how you live; that Christianity is a system of belief rather than a way of life. Tyler said she might choose to follow Jesus, but not as a Christian. At least not the kind of Christianity that I see.

Here's a second story about the what we are summoned to live when the Holy Spirit leads.

When Rev. Will Willimon was Dean of the Chapel at Duke University he preached a sermon, challenging university students to think about how their faith in Jesus should influence their lives and careers. Several weeks after that sermon he received a telephone call from some major donors to the school. They were parents of a young woman in her junior year of pre-med studies. And they were furious. They called to inform him that she had dropped her pre-med major and shifted her coursework to turn focus on what had been her minor in religion.

"She was top of her class in preparing for med school," her father said. "And now she wants to drop it all to become a missionary ***because of what you said in a sermon.***"

Willimon says he began to panic. "Well, I didn't know she would take what I said that seriously," he responded.

"Well, she did!" the mother replied.

They wanted him **to fix it**. So, he invited the young woman to meet with him. “Why are you abandoning all your work to become a doctor?” he asked.

“I could become a doctor,” she said. “I’m sure I could make a fine contribution with doing that, maybe even combine it with my heart for mission. But with all that debt and years of internship, by the time I could think about doing mission work, I would likely be completely committed to a different life. When I heard your sermon, I felt as if it was what I had to do.”

“Well, I’m not sure I meant for you to take what I said that seriously,” Willimon said. “What about the expectations of your family and all the other people in your life?”

And then she said *those words*—those words we know: “I’ve decided I have to obey God’s expectations, rather than the expectations of everyone else.”

Well, not quite Peter’s words, but close enough. Close enough. And that’s when Rev. Willimon realized she was listening to God, listening to Jesus, and pursuing the call of the Holy Spirit. He laid his hand on hers and prayed, “God go with you in all that you do with your life.” That’s **redemptive zeal, not safe religion**.

We are not called to believe in the expectations others have for us. Or our society has for us. Respect them? Of course. But God has called us to a life of living redemptively on behalf of others rather than living for ourselves.

God declared the way.

Jesus modeled the way.

And the Holy Spirit is leading the way.

The question is whether we will dare to follow that way. What I can promise you is that this way is never safe. But it is always redemptive. And my prayer is that, as followers of Jesus, when we find that we’ve been summoned to the witness stand, we will take the challenge seriously and not give in to a **fearful, safe religious** practice, but lean in to a **faithful, redemptive zeal** to guide our paths.

Amen? Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/pledge-allegiance-read-arabic-causing-uproar-new-york-high-school-n326486>.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/georgia-teacher-pulled-classroom-anti-obama-rant-article-1.2202604>.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. H. Mark Ashworth, “Living in the Light of Easter,” Union Cross Baptist Church, Kernersville, NC. NET. At [http://www.unioncrossbaptist.org/Sermons/acts5\\_27-32.htm](http://www.unioncrossbaptist.org/Sermons/acts5_27-32.htm).