

Acts 5:27-32 (Second Sunday of Easter—Series C)
“Witnesses of Jesus Christ”
Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT
April 24, 2022

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text from the First Reading recorded in Acts 5:

²⁷And after they brought them, they stood them before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, “We strictly commanded you not to teach in this name, and behold, you are filling Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring the blood of this man upon us.” ²⁹Peter and the apostles answered and said, “It is necessary to obey God rather than people. ³⁰God our Father raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted Him to His right hand as Ruler and Savior to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses of these things and the Holy Spirit whom God gave to those who obey Him.”

The apostles were at it again. Had they not learned anything from their time in jail? They had been charged not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18). But they continued to do so and were arrested in the temple courts. They were put into the public prison, but the next morning, having been released from jail by an angel of the Lord, they were back in the temple at daybreak, teaching again in the name of Jesus! “Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people” (Acts 5:26 ESV).

Standing before the high priest and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, the apostles were censured again, “We strictly commanded you not to teach in this name, and behold, you are filling Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring the blood of this man upon us.” The Twelve apostles (remember that by this time Matthias had been added to their number as the replacement for Judas Iscariot, because, as the sainted Dr. Norman Nagel often said, “The Lord must have His Twelve”)—these Twelve had been ordered not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. They were clearly disobeying the religious leaders. What

the apostles were doing in preaching and teaching Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the forgiveness of sins was then a criminal activity. But what would have been truly criminal is that if these witnesses did not testify and proclaim what Jesus had accomplished in His life, death, and resurrection, namely salvation from sin and death. Such negligence on the part of the Twelve would certainly be disobeying God in the most wicked way. When the Sanhedrin tried to silence the apostles and stop the teaching in the name of Jesus, the apostles would not, could not, allow themselves to do so. Keeping silent would imply putting the authority of people in the place of the authority of God. So Peter, speaking on behalf of the apostles, states clearly, "It is necessary to obey God rather than people."

Now see what Peter does here. He doesn't go on about the wrongness of the Council's charge and order. He doesn't turn this into some religious-political argument about their rights to teach and preach in the temple. Peter, along with the apostles, who must obey God, whose messenger had told them the very night before, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to all the people the all the words of this Life," spoke to the high priest and the whole Sanhedrin the words of this Life. He taught them in the name of Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life! He bore witness to the work of Jesus in bringing salvation—"repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins."

That's a pretty bold, gutsy move! "Don't teach in the name of Jesus!" Taught in the name of Jesus and got arrested. Got let out of jail by an angel and went and taught again in the name of Jesus. Got brought before the rulers and charged again not to teach in the name of Jesus. "It is necessary to obey God rather than people." Proceeds to teach in the name of Jesus. Right in front of the high priest and the whole ruling council.

Why? Peter and the rest were in front of a hostile audience. These were not folks willing to listen. These were the leaders who could arrest them and throw them back in prison, or worse. Why teach NOW in the name of Jesus? Because “we are witnesses of these things and the Holy Spirit whom God gave to those who believe.”

As Peter and John told this very same council in Acts 4:20, “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” Witnesses witness; they give testimony of the things they have seen and heard. The apostles had seen the risen Jesus, in fact they very same Jesus whom the Jewish Sanhedrin had condemned to death, handed over the Pontius Pilate, and had hanged on a tree—crucified on a cross. The apostles were witnesses to the fact that not only did the Sanhedrin bring about the death of Jesus, a death that was shameful in the eyes of Romans (crucifixion), but they inflicted upon Jesus the death of those who are accursed by God (hanging on a tree), as it is written in Deuteronomy 21, “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God” (Deut. 21:22–23 ESV). Paul picks up this theme in Galatians 3, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Gal. 3:13 ESV).

Peter and the apostles had to testify that God did these things with regard to Jesus—God our Father raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. The Holy Spirit made them witnesses of all these things—His death and resurrection—and the Holy Spirit also bears witness. “God exalted [Jesus] to His right hand as Ruler and Savior to give repentance to Israel and the forgiveness of sins.”

In other words, Peter was saying, "O high priest and leaders of the people. God used your actions so that this Jesus would be crucified, giving His life up into death, so that He might die for your sins, making atonement for you with God. God raised Him from the dead so that repentance and the forgiveness of sins might be proclaimed to all people, beginning with you here and now." And this is exactly what the Risen Lord Christ explained to His disciples on the very first Easter evening. We read in Luke 24, "Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. **You are witnesses of these things.** And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high'" (Luke 24:44–49 ESV).

The power from on high, the Holy Spirit, is the gift of God in the hearts of all who by faith in Jesus obey God and serve as witnesses of the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit wrought in Peter and the apostles a living testimony to Jesus and what God the Father has made Jesus to be by virtue of His death and resurrection—Ruler and Savior! Jesus Christ is Lord—Lord over sin. Lord over death. Lord over Satan. He lives and reigns to all eternity! This is most certainly true! And you are witnesses of these things also.

The Holy Spirit has been given to you as a gift in and through your Baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. Through Baptism and the hearing of the Gospel Word, the

Spirit comes to you and brings faith in Christ to you, along with the forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. "The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers." The Jesus who died on the tree of the cross and rose again from the grave purchased and won your forgiveness with the shedding of His blood. It is the Holy Spirit who delivers this forgiveness to you personally in Baptism, Word, and Lord's Supper.

In this way, you are witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ whom God the Father has exalted to His right hand as Ruler and Savior. He has also given to you by the power of His Holy Spirit repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As you receive forgiveness in the name of Jesus, the Spirit creates within your heart a desire to share that Good News message and to share the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name to others. You and I cannot help but speak about what we have seen and heard in the Scriptures and have received by faith ourselves in the Gospel and the Sacraments. Amen.