

“No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”

Acts 4:5-12

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Sometimes our scripture reading for the morning starts in the middle of the story that's like the lesson for today in verse 5 starting with the trial that is taking place in Jerusalem not telling you really who had been arrested the day before. And there is a strange twist to the story as well. You have to go back to the beginning of chapter 3 to learn that Peter and John were on their way to afternoon prayers at the Temple in Jerusalem when a lame man who had been crippled his entire life stops them at the Gate Beautiful and asks for alms. Peter and John stop and look at him and Peter says to the man, “Silver and gold I have none but I will give you what I have, which is the power to heal you in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth stand up and walk.” The man stood up immediately and was healed. You can imagine the commotion it caused. People came running to see what happened. This man had been by the Gate Beautiful for many years asking for alms and he was all of a sudden healed? Who had done this? So Peter began preaching and telling them about Jesus who was resurrected from the dead.

The authorities did not like that. They didn't like the idea of doing it right there on their own turf in Jerusalem preaching like this and so they had Peter and John arrested. But Luke, the author of Acts says parenthetically, “but many who heard the word believed, and they number about 5,000.” Wow! Peter and John are really hauling in the new members. First it was 3,000 on the day of Pentecost and now another 5,000. No wonder the high priest is a little worried. These are his people mostly who are converting to following the “way of Jesus.” So he had Peter and John put them in jail until the next day, because it was already evening and the high priest didn't want to be bothered with them and upset his dinner plans. Let them cool their heels in prison for a little while.

The next morning the whole family of the high priest shows up for the meeting with these two country bumpkins from Galilee. Here we have the most educated people in Jerusalem in a stand-off with two fishermen from the Sea of Galilee. It was going to be a slam dunk for the high priest. He wanted his whole family to join in the fun.

It is a court room like proceeding and the authorities are in charge. They know the rules. Peter and John don't know the rules. But then the leadership asks a question and makes a mistake. Many lawyers will tell you in a courtroom proceeding never ask a question to which you don't already know the answer. No surprises. The mistake they made with Peter and John was asking, “By what authority and by who's name did you do this?”

Peter takes “this” to mean the healing of the sick man and says, “Rulers of the Jerusalem and elders ... are we being questioned because of a good deed done to someone who was sick?” Ouch! Aren't the rulers and elders supposed to look out for the sick?

All of a sudden, Peter and John went from the defensive to the offensive ...all of a sudden the momentum changed to their side, all of a sudden it was a game changing moment. How can you guys, Rulers of the people and elders, be against doing a good deed to someone who was sick?

This story reminds me of the cynical quote, “No good deed goes unpunished.” It is often attributed to Oscar Wilde but many think it has been around prior to Mr. Wilde. Many of us have had the opportunity to say it out loud or to think it when we did something nice (we thought was nice for someone) only to have them turn around and question either why did we do that or to ask bluntly, “how stupid are you to do something like that?” Maybe you took flowers to someone as a nice thought and the person said to you, “Well, are you going to come back every day and water them? You can see I can’t get around!” Or maybe you were trying to free an animal from a trap and every time you got close it tried to bite you not understanding what you were doing.

A good friend told me the story of how he gives food products to “first responders” such as police and firefighters and is happy to do it. However, he suggested to one after they received food and put a tip in the tip jar, “Thank you for the tip for my employees, would you mind telling your friends who don’t tip that it would be a nice thing to do just like you did today.” He said the person came back twenty minutes later jammed a \$20 bill into the jar and said, “There you go, none of my friends will ever come back to your store.”

The saying, “No good deeds goes unpunished,” is for some proof that life is unfair and people can do or can try to do good things for others and still end up in trouble. I can affirm to those who believe that life is unfair that they are right. Life is unfair, God never promised us fair. God did promise us that we will not be treated more unfairly than his son Jesus.

Now, back to the story. Peter had shifted the question from one about authority and power to a question about doing a good deed to someone who was sick. You could now hear a pin drop in the room. Luke is subtly telling us that Peter has shifted the emphasis from “How dare you preach on our turf” to “Do you really want to accuse us of helping a sick person?”

Peter and John healed a sick man on their way up to the Temple for afternoon prayers and what it got them was arrested, thrown in jail overnight and brought before the whole priestly family the next morning to answer charges on “By who’s authority and name have you done these things?”

The name was really the greater concern for the priestly family. We are just about 2 months after the crucifixion of Jesus in this story. The seven week wait for Pentecost had barely ended, the disciples now apostles were still trying to digest the idea of the Holy Spirit giving them power to do things in Jesus’ name. And the high priest and his cohorts remember all of the proceedings about the upcountry rabbi and false prophet from Galilee that they had demanded the Romans crucify.

The name Jesus was a common enough name. The Hebrew name “Joshua” was a favorite among the people so there were lots of Jesus’ running around. But there was one Jesus in particular that was causing them trouble even though they had disposed of him. They could hear the power in the way the people were whispering the name Jesus in the streets and even on Temple Mount. They could hear the anticipation of something great about this Jesus the Christ that could not be

true ... not true for them anyway. This Jesus was the one they had crucified and now they were afraid that he might be back from the dead. How could that be? How was it possible? It couldn't be possible so they had to deal with these upstart apostles of his ... teach them a lesson. But things had gone from good to bad, from them having the upper hand to allowing Galileans to take charge. The name Jesus was back.

Peter goes on to answer his own question. Don't you just love it when someone asks a question and while you are trying to figure out an answer the person goes right ahead and answers his own question? "ARE you really questioning us about doing a good deed in helping a sick man and asking how was this man healed?" Peter doesn't even pause. He doesn't wait for an affirmation that this is what they are asking. Even in the scripture text there is only a slight comma. No question mark just a comma as Peter hurries on to answer the question before any of the well-educated can respond.

"let it be known to all of you, and to the whole house of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health, by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth." Peter was identifying signs and wonders that he and John had done in the name of the itinerant rabbi, signs and wonders like Jesus had done while he was alive months earlier and claiming that by the name of Jesus Christ comes salvation, forgiveness of sins, healings and the resurrection from the dead. Wow! This Jesus just won't go away. The words of the Rabbi Gamaliel were coming true, "I tell you keep away from these disciples and let them alone; because if this plan is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in this case you may even be found fighting against God!" (Acts 5:34ff)

C. S. Lewis once noted that Jesus spoke and acted in such a way that one either had to follow him or else decide that he was crazy. There is no gray. There was no middle ground in his kingdom. You either had to move toward it, risk letting go and being caught up in Jesus, or else you had to move on, like the rich young ruler, realizing that you wanted to retain citizenship in the kingdoms of the world. Peter and John have moved toward Jesus' kingdom. Their healing of a crippled man is a sign that new power is loose in the world.

The story that Peter tells, when asked "by what authority do you do these things?" is the story of death and resurrection. This is the source of any power we have in the face of the world's power.

Peter found the courage through the Holy Spirit to speak to the authorities that had called him and John on the carpet. Peter goes on to say, "The stone the builders have rejected has become the chief cornerstone of hope in the future. Now the authorities have a real problem on their hands. They have been backed into a corner by two uneducated Galileans. A miracle of healing has taken place, a sick man has been made well. If they clamp down too hard they will have a problem with the general population of Jerusalem.

So, what do they do? They tell Peter and John to keep quiet. "Don't tell anybody about this Jesus Christ of Nazareth," they say. It is what the authorities always try to do to keep information from others. They try suppression of the press, banning of books, and today shutting down access to the internet. If they had had twitter accounts can you imagine how quickly the word would have gone viral around the world?

Unfortunately for the rulers, trying to keep spirited filled apostles quiet is like trying to hold back a bursting wave. These apostles are not trying to stir up trouble, they simply want the freedom to “witness to what we have seen and heard.”

They had experienced Jesus, experiencing Jesus can turn your life upside down, as Peter’s life amply demonstrates. It changes your values as well as your conversation. In the presence of the resurrected Savior, you realize you are with one who knows the dark side of your life as well as the public face; one who knows things that you have hidden successfully from the powers that be ... whether that be your boss or co-workers or your family ... knows you better than you know yourself. This Jesus who knows your failures and your weaknesses and anxieties about the future, is the one who takes away the burdens you are carrying. Jesus is the one who gives you a new life. Jesus is the one who saves and heals. And when you evoke the holy name of Jesus, the power that would silence you holds no power over you. When you confess the one whose name is Jesus as your Lord, life is transformed. Like Peter, you can be changed from a hot-tempered, two-faced coward into someone radiant, joyful, brave; someone, who participates in God’s ongoing work of redemption through the power of Jesus’ name.