

Scriptures: John 20:19-31; Acts 5:27-39

### **CEI Christians**

Last week was one of the busiest weeks for churches in the year. Here at New Hope, we offered five worship services – opportunities for people to draw nearer to Jesus Christ – between Palm/Passion Sunday and our 10 o'clock service on Easter morning. Four of them were in-person. Have you ever considered the similarities between the Advent season, which concludes with the Christmas Eve service announcing Christ's birth, and the Lenten season, which concludes with the variety of emotions and experiences encountered during Holy Week, culminating in the best news the world has ever heard, that "Christ has risen?" There are a lot of similarities between the Advent season and the Lenten season, and between Christmas and Easter. For years I've been stunned – even before COVID – at the numbers of people who would come to worship on those most holy days of the Christian year, only to see the numbers drop off the following week.

It's like they come for the experience, and then run out of steam by Easter Monday, and they're back into their old routines and ways of doing things. Several years ago I picked up a label for folks who do that, from some of our Catholic friends up at Botkins – "CEI Christians." In other words, Christmas, Easter, and In need of Prayer Christians. They were saying that's when you see some of them show up in church. Sadly, it's a very real thing for a majority of people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, especially in America. We take it for granted that we can check in – or out – of the Church as it's convenient for us. Doing that really messes up the witness of the Church, in general, to the rest of the world, because they see no difference between the lives they live and the lives we live. I touched on this very briefly last week, and we're going to go deeper into it today. If you brought your Bible with you, or have a Bible app, turn with me to Acts 5:27-39. **Read Acts 5:27-39.**

We need to fill in some gaps between our gospel lesson this morning, which recounts Jesus' appearance to His disciples on that first Easter night, and this text. After He arose, Jesus spent 40 days showing Himself to His followers, continuing to teach them, and in Acts 1, they watch Him ascend into Heaven. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost, and the disciples become filled with the Holy Spirit, preaching and teaching, and telling a huge crowd all about Jesus Christ crucified, resurrected, and ascended. The apostles heal a beggar in Acts 3, and are arrested and put in jail in Acts 4 by the religious leaders. We could say by the "religious" leaders. They are aware of what's happened, but they won't admit they're wrong. So they let Peter and John off the hook, give them a slap on the wrist, and "commanded them not speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus," (Acts 4:18).

### **Don't Teach In This Name**

We see how that worked in our text this morning. "Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest,"

(Acts 5:27). The Sanhedrin was a group of between 70 and 100 men who had a role similar to our United States Supreme Court and Congress. They made up laws – rules, actually, which they expected people to live by, and then sat in judgment over the way people interacted with themselves and God. The closest thing I can think of in the world today that’s actually real similar to it would be in Iran, since the revolution of 1979, the Ayatollah has appointed what’s known as the Council of Guardians. It’s a group of Muslim priests who are appointed by the Ayatollah, who then oversee their Parliament and Supreme Court. Nothing becomes a law unless the Guardians approve it. They also approve a new Ayatollah once the incumbent dies.

Sometimes we make the mistake of seeing the Sanhedrin being somewhat limited in scope as far as the power they had because they had to go to Pilate to have Jesus crucified. Make no mistake, friends, they were a powerful bunch of politicians in their day, and they knew how to hold on to power better, perhaps then our own politicians do today. And the high priest was the top-dog in the Sanhedrin. Notice what the high priest tells the apostles. “‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,’ he said. ‘Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood,’” (verse 28). There are a couple things which stand out here. First, the high priest sees they’ve told these guys before to knock it off, and they haven’t listened. In fact, Luke records here that the apostles “had filled Jerusalem with their teaching.” Church, what is it that the disciples were teaching? Christ crucified, resurrected, and ascended – for the salvation of the world, and for restoration of right relationship in all its forms – with God, with others, with self when the Spirit of Christ is seated on our heart’s throne.

That’s what they’re preaching, and it rubs the “religious” leaders of the day the wrong way. Notice how Peter and the apostles respond. “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel,” (verses 29-31). It’s remarkable, that roughly a month and a half after Easter morning, these guys have went from hiding in fear for their lives and denying even knowing Jesus Christ, to publicly preaching about Him, and what He’s done for the people of Israel – and all of us today. They’ve literally done a 180° about-face with regards to being concerned for their own well-being.

### **They Were Witnesses**

Let’s consider this for just a moment. If the whole thing with Easter was an elaborate hoax – a fraud – that the disciples somehow managed to pull off, would they risk their lives in support of it? Would John the apostle spend the next 40 odd years saying the same story over and over even while he slaved away in the mines on the island of Patmos? Would they have all willingly allowed themselves to be martyred – all the apostles were put to death for their faith – if the resurrection of Jesus Christ was some ruse? See, this is the counter-argument to an atheistic view that it’s all fake.

People don't put their lives on the line, and willingly die for a cause unless they wholeheartedly believe it to be true beyond a shadow of a doubt.

This brings us to the conclusion of the assigned lectionary reading for today, but I felt we should go on a bit further to draw another connection, which we'll make momentarily. Notice what Peter's closing argument is. "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him," (verse 32). We are witnesses. They were, literally, eye-witnesses to what they were teaching and preaching. And friends, so it should be with us! We should be talking boldly about all the things Christ has done that have impacted our lives, and made us better people.

We heard the rest of the story from our Scripture this morning. The members of the Sanhedrin got pretty hot under the collar, even to the point that they wanted to execute them. From our reading, did you catch who intervenes on the apostles' behalf? "But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while," (verse 34), the author records.

### **Gamaliel Teacher of Saul**

What's significant about Gamaliel? Well, for starters, he's a member of the Sanhedrin. He's probably more well-known though because of the actions of one of his students, Saul of Tarsus. Saul of Tarsus became Paul – one of the greatest missionaries in Church history. After his conversion, Paul, speaking to some Jews who had arrested him, said, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today," (Acts 22:3).

There are two things about Gamaliel's speech to the Sanhedrin to which I want to draw your attention. First, the big idea. Generally speaking, Gamaliel says "I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God," (Acts 5:38-39). I suspect that Gamaliel believed the actions of the apostles were of human origin, which brings us to the second, and lesser point of his speech, from our view.

He talks about a couple different guys. The first is Theudas, who Gamaliel says, "appeared claiming to be somebody, and about 400 men rallied to him," (verse 36). The second is "Judas the Galilean... [who] led a band of people in revolt," (verse 37). What happens to both of the guys Gamaliel mentions? They were killed, presumably at the hands of the Romans. That's what the Roman Empire did with people who rebelled, they killed them – and they were good at it!

### **We Are Witnesses**

The obvious difference here, which we know – and Gamaliel did not – is that Peter and the apostles were telling a true story. They were eyewitnesses, of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who lived, died, and rose again! And church, we are also called to likewise be witnesses of what He's done and continues to do in our lives. As United

Methodists, often when it comes to the topic of Confirmation, we think of it along the lines of a graduation or something. It's not. It's a first step by a young person in laying claim to their faith.

It's an opportunity for them to consider the depths of Christ's love for us, and to accept it for themselves. It's them stepping up to relieve their parents, in a sense, of the promises made at their baptism, and of their assuming personal responsibility and ownership of their faith. Yet at the same time it is also a deepening of the relationship of them within the church. Really, it's all about commitment. They are committing themselves to a lifetime of faithfully following Jesus Christ. Sometimes we start these things, and realize that our young people need more time to think about and process all of this. There's no shame in that. We'd rather have them be fully, 100% determined to living a lifetime of faithful loyalty and service to Jesus Christ than just "jumping through a hoop," so to speak, because everyone else is, or because someone else expects them to do it.

It gives me great pleasure, New Hope, to tell you that today we have three young ladies who have completed all aspects of the Confirmation class, and are ready to make that life-long commitment to following Jesus Christ as active members of the Church. From our conversations, I don't anticipate them being CEI Christians. Before we recognize them, I'd like to take a moment to recognize all the mentors who were involved with this Confirmation class. Mentors, could you stand up where you are? Church, these mentors have made it a point to make sure our young people are equipped and prepared to confirm their baptismal vows. It's important to continue to share our witness with these precious ones. Thank you for your service to these young people, the Church, and to Jesus Christ.

The world is full of precious ones to Jesus Christ, and our United Methodist mission, "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world," speaks to that, as does your mission statement, "to make disciples of Jesus Christ and to bring hope, grace, and salvation to God's people." The hope, grace, and salvation you bring, New Hope, is a current, present reality right here in Shelby County – and not something that only happens someday when we all get to heaven! Let's pray.

**Prayer:** O living Christ, as the good news of Easter energized Your first disciples to establish dynamic Christian communities, so energize us to dynamic life within our congregation. As Your Spirit gave them courage to stand tall before the powers of this world, so empower us to proclaim Your gospel and struggle for justice and peace. By Your presence with us now, make us one in love and mission. Amen.