

June 7, 2020
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Acts 5:27-39
Held in the Center



When the [temple] police brought the disciples, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in [Jesus'] name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching...' 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 had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him ... And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to [us].' When they [that's the religious leaders- and, the elders of the council] heard Peter's reply, they were enraged and wanted to kill Jesus' followers .

The text says the priests & city leadership were so enraged by these street prophets that they wanted to kill them! Peter and John have already been arrested twice for spreading their Jesus message. There were no rights to free speech under Roman rule. No rights for peaceful assembly. They've been given strict orders to stop talking about Jesus. But they didn't. They would rather go to jail or be executed than to live without challenging the system.

Whoever thinks that Christianity is just a religion of feel-good, escape from harsh realities of life hasn't studied much of the Bible. Whoever thinks the church should just sing about sweet, baby Jesus, and not comment on the social and political realities and brokenness overwhelming this nation, well, I encourage you to read again.

From the Hebrew prophets who warned -then witnessed- their nation fall apart because of the privileged ruling class taking advantage of the poor servant class because they allowed injustice in their courts of law - yep, that's what it says in the Bible.... to Jesus and the early communities who gathered around him- addressing the social and political realities of the poor and marginalized is the golden strand woven throughout the Bible's story.

The Bible announces God's preferential care for those trampled upon by injustices. That's the liberation story from Genesis to Revelation- the beginning and the end of the Bible - and everything in between. The church cannot stand silent to dominate powers who trample upon the poor-not if it is to bear witness to life and teachings of Jesus, not if it is to live the way of Jesus.

The stories from the Bible tell of Jesus crucifixion as a means to silence him and stop his encouragement of the marginalized. Jesus was killed by the religious rulers and executed by the state for insurrection against the powers that be. That's addressing the social and political situation with your life on the line.

In Acts the author tells of the apostles imprisonment over and over as the early church formed. It tells of Stephen's arrest and stoning, of James' execution, and of a riot in Ephesus erupting against Paul's traveling companions.- all because they continued to preach a revolutionary message of love for all people. That's addressing the social and political situation.

The early church was persecuted and leaders were executed not because they were offering a feel-good escapism, but because they were sharing a radical message - that all people are sacred - all people are loved - all people live in God's grace.

I don't know about you, but I suspect you are weary. I know I am. The events of these days and months weigh heavy on our souls. We've been on lock-down, quarantine for several months. There is a fatigue that comes with the pandemic crisis. We have had personal problems that did not stop because the pandemic arose. Loved ones still got sick, and some have born the weight of death during this time. Divorce papers were still filed; rent was still due; job uncertainty only grew greater. Health, relationships, personal and global economics have pressed upon us. And into that extreme fatigue - we witnessed the murder of George Floyd- and now others- that have called this nation to action, to name our privilege and to work to dismantle the systemic inequities in our country.

We are emotionally and physically exhausted. I would like nothing more than sweet baby Jesus and the gentle mothering lap of God's tenderness to envelop me - and all of us in a womb of feel-good, escape from the pain and suffering of this world. I need that. We all need that.

So, the question is given to us at this time - is no different than the question given to us every week, every single day of our journey. What are we to do? What is the church to do? How to we respond to the brokenness around us? How do we find and bring healing to our souls and offer it to one another? How do we respond to the injustices- without filling our hearts full of hatred- making us no different than those we oppose? How do we act with mercy and justice - and fight an unending battle against domination by the powerful -without waking exhausted before we begin the day? How to we offer the tenderness, care and compassion to others when we barely have the energy to summon it for ourselves?

Here's the only thing I have to offer: stay connected to the Holy Divine living in the Center. It's the only way we might get through each day personally. Its the only way we will bring the change that is needed nationally.

Stay connected to the Holy Divine center as gathered community of faiths, to be reminded of who we are and all are sacred. Stay connected to be reminded of whose we are - all are loved. Stay connected to your faith community. Spend time in your holy scriptures. Read of the struggle of our faith ancestors who gave their lives announcing God's love (read Acts) Read of the prophets who called their nation to be better who called for fair treatment of the marginalized, who demanded their nation offer justice in the courts (read Amos, and Micah for inspiration). Spend time in your faith rituals , sharing in communion, remembering your baptism/bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah /confirmations/ ordinations.

Stay connected to the Holy Divine center - giving breath and life found in the innermost chamber of every single being. Stay connected to the still small voice within you. Pray, meditate, center. Spend time allowing the Light of God's love to enfold you. Climb upon the great mothering lap of God, snuggle into her bosom, nurse on her love. Spend time:personal, alone, quite time-caring for your soul.

Luke records it in Acts, and Paul writes it in his letters to the early churches and John writes of it to the community whose world was falling apart in The Book of Revelation. Scriptures are written, dreams given, visions shared to bring change and to give us hope. To shepherd us through the trials and to remind us - we are not in this alone.

The authors of the Christian texts were clear. They confirm who we are, God's beloved, and they remind us to stay centered in God. In our story from Acts, As Peter and John faced the enraged religious authorities of their day who want to kill them for their street preaching, a Pharisee - "who was respected by all the people" interrupted their executions and addressed the powers in the room saying,"consider carefully what you

propose to do to these men... If their plan is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them..."

God's love lives in our service and our giving, and caring for the world beyond these walls, the world will be transformed by God's love where all people are treated justly as we live to make it a reality. We know that if this movement is just of human origin, it will surely fail. But if what we do is of God, we cannot fail. Thanks be to God. Amen.