

Acts 5:27-42 ²⁷When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, ‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.’ ²⁹But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority. ³⁰The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³²And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.’ ³³When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. ³⁵Then he said to them, ‘Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. ³⁶For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and about 400 men joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. ³⁷After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!’ They were convinced by him, ⁴⁰and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. ⁴²And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

Acts 5:27-42

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“Determined”

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A young fellow wanted to be a star journalist but lived in a small town, so he did not have many opportunities for a big story. Then one day, the dam upstream broke and the town was flooded. He got in a rowboat and headed out looking to break a big story. Soon, he found a lady sitting on her rooftop. He tied up the boat and told her what he was after. They sat together and watched as various items floated by. She would see something and say, "Now there's a story." But the youth said, "no, that's not a story." Finally a hat floated by. To the young fellow's surprise, the hat then did a 180 degree turn, floated upstream a ways and then did another 180 degree turn. The pattern repeated itself and the young fellow was ecstatic. "There's a story!" he cried out delightedly. But the women shook her head. "No, that's not a story, " she said. "That's my husband Hayford. He said that even come hell or high water, he was gonna mow the lawn today!"

I don't know if that young fellow found his big story or not, but you and I have found ours, haven't we? The biggest, best bit of good news every reported: early dawn, empty tomb, risen Lord! And risen hopes. Resurrection changes people. We heard last week what it did for Thomas, known through history as the doubter when, in fact, he comes to believe most profoundly. "My Lord and my God!" Pretty convincing.

And then there's Peter. We meet him in this morning's text from Acts. He's not quite like the Peter one encounters in the gospels—the one who denies knowing Jesus after swearing to die with him at the last supper, the one who looks at the empty tomb and can't wrap his mind around it. This Peter has more backbone. Come hell or high water, he's gonna preach the word. Which is where we find him. It's also where the temple police find him.

But before we dig into his words, let's put it all in context. Jesus has been crucified and raised. Fifty days later, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the disciples in Jerusalem at Pentecost—that's Acts 2.

Immediately, the disciples get organized and begin to preach. They heal people, which is fairly persuasive, and many come to believe in Christ—that's Acts 3. Unfortunately, that's also when they're arrested the first time. But the council can't do much, really. I mean, these followers of Jesus are healing people in the streets, in front of witnesses. The people know something pretty spectacular is happening. About all the council can do is order them not to speak in Jesus' name anymore because it riles the crowd, and then let them go—that's Acts 4. But of course, they go on preaching and teaching. Today's reading from Acts 5 tells of the second arrest. Remember, only a few months have passed since Jesus himself was standing before the council, while Peter was standing outside in the dark, denying any association with Jesus whatsoever. Now it's Peter standing on trial, and all the council wants him to do is deny once more.

But he can't. The post-resurrection Peter is not his own anymore. He belongs to God.

Look at how our reading from Acts begins this morning: They brought Peter and other disciples—we're not sure who, exactly—to stand before the council, and the high priest said to them, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." Determined to bring this man's blood on us. That's an interesting phrase. We know what he means, the high priest—he means, "you're determined to make us look bad; to pin guilt on us for killing Jesus." And by extension, he seems to be accusing Peter of preaching solely for the purpose of degrading the leadership and whipping the people up into a frenzy.

And I guess that's how Peter takes it, too, because he kind of rubs it in a bit. "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom *you* killed by hanging him on a tree..." (emphasis mine) In other words: yeah, it's your fault! And then his language gets a little more incendiary. Jesus is in charge of repentance and forgiveness. We are witnesses. The Holy Spirit works in those who believe and obey. He's basically just cut the entire Jewish leadership out of the loop. They're not needed—not needed for forgiveness, not needed to tell the story, to study it, to interpret it. And they certainly don't merit obedience. No wonder the council is ticked off! Peter is thumbing his nose at them.

In modern history, such phrases have been used to justify antisemitism, but that was never Peter's intent. The gospel isn't meant to justify hatred. Instead, let's go back to that phrase from the beginning of the passage—you are determined to bring this man's blood on us—and let's consider the possibility that they are more right than they know. If we allow our minds to seep down into the layers below the surface-level meanings we've already discussed, we can contend that the followers of Jesus were very determined to bring Jesus' blood on them and on all of us. But not as a means of guilt, blame, or judgment. The blood of Jesus has always symbolized the love of God poured out for humanity. It is a cleansing agent for sin, a healing agent for brokenness, and a bonding agent for the family of God. The blood of Jesus is life, and his disciples were determined to share it.

Today, many shy away from a discussion about the blood of Christ. A modern society tends to find the idea of drinking Christ's blood, for example, to be a rather gruesome and gory means of remembrance, but please remember that we don't actually drink blood. It's grape juice in that cup. It's grape juice before I pray over it. It's grape juice after I pray over it. It's grape juice when you put it in your mouth. And it remains grape juice as you get up from this place and go on your way. The fact that it's grape juice doesn't diminish its power. In keeping with the Passover tradition, Jesus gave us food items—bread and wine—as symbols of remembrance. Compelling symbols representing the lengths to which God was willing to go on behalf of humankind. And it is still true that no matter what's in that cup, God meets us at the table—a holy mystery in which we somehow find ourselves a part of something bigger than ourselves; something that defies explanation, description, or categorization.

"You are determined to bring this man's blood on us..." You bet they are! The blood of Jesus is life. And as followers of Christ, we ought to be equally determined to be channels through which the lifeblood of God surges into a world in need; channels through which the grace, the healing, and the love of God may flow. But what does that mean? And how do we open ourselves to that possibility?

I'm thinking that the key to it all lies in the word 'determined'. (You might have guessed that, given the sermon title for this morning.) Determination involves two interrelated components. One is perseverance or tenacity. A person determined to do something is going to be ready to endure over the long haul. But determination also involves commitment or resolve. A person determined to do something has made a decision to stick to it come hell or high water (one might say). Another way to put this might be to say that one who is determined has both their heart and their head working in tandem. That is determination, and it's a fitting accusation for the council to level at Peter. He is, indeed, determined.

Now most of us are not Peter—we're not a hero, a charismatic leader, a mouthpiece for God. But the church only needs a handful of Peters and Pauls. God calls all of us to be followers, listeners, servants. And we only have to look at what Peter was determined to be and to do to discover that in essentials, we're not all that different.

It's clear, first of all, that Peter is determined to be obedient. "We must obey God rather than any human authority," he says. Obedience is not a popular word in today's world, but it is necessary if one is determined to part of God's team working in the community. The question, of course, is how to distinguish the call to obey God from other calls upon our life. Sometimes I wonder if it's more difficult than it has to be merely because we don't recognize that our callings are as diverse as we are, and many times, God has already built into us what God is calling us to do. It's not necessarily our profession. It may be our way of making friends, or our way of listening, or our commitment to help the poor or protect the planet or protect endangered species.

I'll be the first to admit, it's not always easy to discern or discover how we are being asked to obey God's leading in our lives. And it's not always easy to be obedient to who God has created us to be when it threatens a relationship or comfortable situation. Peter knows what he has to do. It's part of who he is. And it won't be easy. But he's determined to obey.

It also clear that Peter is determined to be selfless. He's not looking for fame, although it finds him anyway. He's not looking for trouble, though that finds him as well. He's not looking for self-preservation—not anymore. He's been there and he knows the emptiness of it. He is looking for nothing more or less than that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. At last, he understands that this isn't about him. It's about Christ working through him. And that is all he wants. He is determined to bring Christ's blood on us all.

"I was reading about a journalist who stopped his car in front of a house that Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter had helped to build for Habitat for Humanity. A little boy was standing in the front yard, probably about five or six years old. The little lad ran out and put his hands on the side of the car, and said, "Man, you sure got a pretty car."

"The man in the car replied, "Well, you've sure got a pretty house. Which one of these houses is yours?"

"The little fellow pointed and said proudly, "That one."

"The man in the car asked, "Young man, who built your house?" He thought the boy was going to tell him it was Jimmy Carter who built his house. But instead, the lad gave a big smile, and said, "Jesus built my house."

"Sometime later, that story was reported back to Jimmy Carter, and the journalist wondered what the former president would think about that. Not surprisingly, Jimmy Carter said the boy had it exactly right. [5 ¶s from "About Habitat for Humanity," Millard Fuller, *Pulpit Digest*, Nov./Dec. 1991, p. 69; as used in "He Is Who He Says He Is" by King Duncan, www.esermons.com. Adapted here.] Jesus built that house. Not Jimmy Carter. And Jimmy Carter had enough wisdom to know it, probably because he had long ago determined that to the best of his ability, he would put the needs of God and neighbor ahead of the needs of Jimmy Carter.

Finally, it is clear to me that Peter is determined to be grateful. Even in suffering, he finds the will to give thanks to God. In fact, the text reports that after they had been flogged, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. Which impresses me, frankly, because I find it hard to be grateful when I'm feeling hurt, stressed, or exhausted. Yet psychological studies increasingly confirm what religion has been teaching for centuries—one cannot be grateful and be anxious at the same time. Studies indicate that gratitude can outweigh discouragement, hatred, jealousy, anger or fear. We all have to pick between gratitude and grumbling. And it is a choice.

I read a fascinating article online by Sarah Theborge, who tells about attending "...a women's business etiquette seminar where the differences between gender communication were discussed. The lecturer revealed that in business settings, women say "thank you" nearly twice as often as men. But we were not commended for this accomplishment, says Theborge. We were chastised. Why? Because most of the time, women said "thank you" to fill an awkward silence, or because they didn't know what else to say, or because it was a convenient segue, or because it provided closure to a conversation. They rarely said it because they were actually thankful.

"Participants at the seminar were warned that when you say "thank you" without cause, it's actually detrimental to you because it makes you seem disingenuous and inarticulate.

Theborge writes, "At first I was offended by the stereotype. Certainly not all women were guilty of this faux pas, I thought. And then I went back to work and realized that maybe all women didn't fit the stereotype, but I sure did.

She then reflects, "I think a lot of Christians behave toward God like some women behave toward business associates. In our prayers and in our praise songs, we say "thank you" to Him because we think it's the right thing to say... We say it to sound better than we are, to fill an awkward silence, to segue to another part of the Sunday morning service. [*Sarah Theborge studied medicine at Yale and journalism at Columbia. She currently lives and practices medicine in Portland, Oregon; 4 ¶s adapted from <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/current-events/features/19158-giving-thanks.>] Or maybe we say it to get out of a deeper conversation with God.*

Peter meant it when he expressed thankfulness. It welled up from within. It was the choice he made. It was part of who he had become post-resurrection. He was determined to be thankful—thankful that Christ had brought his blood to bear for Peter's life.

Determined to bring this man's blood upon us—that was the accusation, and Peter didn't deny it. He was determined to do what he had to get the word out. He was determined to be obedient, selfless, and grateful in all circumstances so that God could work through him.

"In his autobiography, *Breaking Barriers*, syndicated columnist Carl Rowan tells about a teacher – Miss Thompson – who greatly influenced his life... and gave him a desperately needed belief in himself. Rowan writes, "A newspaper printed the story, and someone mailed the clipping to my beloved teacher. She wrote me: "You have no idea what that newspaper story meant to me. For years, I endured my brother's arguments that I had wasted my life; that I should have married and had a family. When I read that you gave me credit for helping to launch a marvelous career, I put the clipping in front of my brother. After he'd read it, I said, 'You see, I didn't really waste my life, did I?'" [from *Reader's Digest*, January 1992; appearing on illustrations for gratitude on www.esermons.com.]

How many people throughout history have been told they wasted their lives because they subjugated their wills, their needs, their fears and doubts to the big plan God had put before them? How many people throughout history have mistaken determination for obstinacy or foolishness? And how much bleaker would history be if one man had not been determined to walk up a hill and suffer, walk through the darkness of death to defeat it, and walk out of tomb to love and life with all its triumphs and tragedies? Thank God, we'll never know just how bleak it could have been. And thank God, those determined to follow this man were determined to bring his blood on all of us. And by the grace of God, so shall we. Amen.