

Recognized

Acts 4:13-22 ~ April 2, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

With the confirmation vote for our newest Supreme Court judge hanging over a conflicted Senate next week, many of us have been thinking about the nature and purpose of the judiciary in our country. We have a rich tradition of separating power into three different branches of government. Congress makes the laws. The executive branch carries out laws. And the judiciary interprets the meaning of laws when disputes inevitably arise. The Supreme Court is the final arbiter of all disputes. So naturally the women and men who make up that court, with their ethical and moral convictions, are of great concern to everyone in our country.

Now I am raising this point for a reason that has nothing to do with our national interest in America today. But, I am asking you to examine your own feelings about the US Supreme Court in order to better connect to the story in today's Sermon Text. Why am I doing this? The reason is that the legal entity in our sermon text, referred to as the Sanhedrin, best corresponds to our supreme court more than any other branch of our government. There are some important differences that I will try to point out as we go along, but for the most part it is reasonable to imagine that today's text is a story about Peter and John being called up to stand before the Supreme Court of Israel for judgment.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they recognized that these men had been with Jesus.

We will not understand what kind of courage Peter and John were exhibiting here until we understand the nature of the Sanhedrin and its power in ancient Israel. The Sanhedrin attributes its authority and scriptural precedent to Moses' appointment of the 70 elders in Exodus 24 and Numbers 11. However, the actual Sanhedrin that Peter and John stood before had existed for only about 200 years. It was closely linked with the local Roman Government. Even though its stated purpose was to provide judgments about the religious laws of Israel, it was for the most part co-opted by the Romans to help control the local populace.

It often puzzles modern Christians why the leading Jews and particularly the Sanhedrin rejected Jesus and persecuted his followers. The Jews standard for recognizing the true messiah was the signs and miracles Jesus performed. But for the Sanhedrin, any

messiah, true or not, was a threat to their existence. A Messiah compromised the future they envisioned for the state of Israel. It shouldn't be that hard for us to imagine that the political leadership of a country could become cynical toward its own religious heritage. But that was what had happened to the Sanhedrin. Jesus had excited the crowds and threatened the political power of the Jewish leadership. This leadership had used its power as the Supreme Court to pass judgment against Jesus and condemn him to die.

But now there was a new stir in Jerusalem. A sign attributed to the prophet Joel had occurred at Pentecost. Many had claimed that God's Spirit had been poured out on all flesh. As evidence of this the common fishermen, Peter and John, had healed a forty year old man born lame. And these miracles and the teaching of a resurrected Jesus were being openly proclaimed by his followers. It must have felt to the Sanhedrin like they were fighting the mythical hydra. A beast that when its head is cut off, two grew back in its place.

This brings us to today's text. The Sanhedrin had dragged Peter and John off the street to face judgment. These Jewish leaders were used to having a very intimidating effect on those that were brought to trial before them. But even though they were common men, not known for academic honors or intellectual prowess, Peter and John were not intimidated by the auspicious authority of Jerusalem's ruling power. That very lack of intimidation reminded the Sanhedrin of someone. It reminded them of that late night kangaroo court they had held to pass judgment against Jesus. On that night Peter had quaked with fear and tried to hide his identity by denying his relationship to Jesus. But on the day he and John stood before the Sanhedrin all of that was passed. Nothing needed to be said. His very demeanor identified him. They immediately recognized that he had been with Jesus. He had the same confidence. He had the same moral authority. He had been party to the same expression of power in the healing of a man born lame. And his massive popularity with the crowds which endangered the Sanhedrin was exactly the same as their recent struggles with the Nazarene. They could not help but recognized that Peter and John had been with Jesus. So what could they do?

So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everyone living in Jerusalem knows they have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name." Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

The only thing the Sanhedrin could do the Peter and John was to threaten them. Punishing them openly would bring the wrath of people down on the Sanhedrin. They were already on shaky footing after the debacle with Jesus. But they were not yet prepared to take judicial action against the followers of Jesus. That would come later. But at this point they settled for brow beating.

Peter and John's response showed just how little effect this had. They responded saying,

“Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to God? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

This is an amazing response. It calls upon the Supreme Court of Israel to Judge between its purposes and the purposes of God. They were smart well educated men. Clearly they knew the scripture about the Messiah. They knew that they had acted against their own religious beliefs to support their political fears. Now they were being called to account for their actions by Jesus' followers. Which was more important for believers in Israel: faith in God or political expediency? There could only be one good answer to that question and it convicted the very men charged with seeing that justice was done. In the end they were found wanting.

So what does this story about Peter, John, and the Sanhedrin mean for us today? Are Peter and John merely examples of courage from ages past? Or is there something in this story that is worth our attention right now?

It would be simple to say that we need to be bolder in our Christianity. Peter and John demonstrated real courage in the face of social pressure against their witness to Jesus Christ. It's true that should inspire us. And I think it does. But when the rubber meets the road, just interpreting this to mean encouragement for our witness in the face of cultural adversity falls far short of its true implications.

I think the more important question is about how we are recognized. There is a trite saying, “If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” In other words, it is an open question whether the world recognizes us as being with Jesus. That is after all what we want to accomplish as Christians, isn't it?

If we did a Google search about ourselves what would we find? Would there be clear evidence of our boldness for Christ. Or what if we looked at our patterns in social media? Would our “posts” and “likes” demonstrate our faith in the power and authority of Jesus? Would we be recognized as being with Jesus? What would our public activities show? Or what would the conversations we have others demonstrate? My

look into a web search of myself didn't turn up anything very promising. But it did get me to thinking that I should really consider all of my life as a potential opportunity to witness to Jesus? I think we all want to share that trait with John and Peter that we are recognized as being with Jesus.

I think this is well worth some time and effort to think about and perhaps on which to take action. What things can we do with our lives that leave the mark of Christ on our existence? Certainly the things that Jesus has asked us to do in his name. Loving one another as he has loved us is chief among them. Working for reconciliation in the world is another thing. That is, being part of actions that bring people together rather than divide us from each other. This does not mean watering down our faith and witness to make ourselves acceptable. But it does mean accepting others as Christ accepts them; forgiving as Jesus forgives; and being quick to repent our own faults and shortcomings. It also means acting in the light. In other words, we must act in ways that show Jesus to others. This is not an invitation to hypocritical behavior. No, let our actions and our beliefs be united in public behavior. This is what we see Peter and John doing. And as they testify, they have no choice because of what they have seen in Jesus.

Here is where the rubber really meets the road for us. What do we see in Jesus? Is the eternal life Jesus offers us freely, by grace, our chief prize in this life? Is its value beyond anything else? Is it our chief desire for our family and our friends? The answers to those questions will determine how bold we can become. Those answers are the connection that makes it possible for us to be recognized as being with Jesus.

Today, let us face the challenge to open our Scriptures and study the Word of God. Let us seek after the mind of the Christ, which God revealed in Jesus. Let us anchor our lives in prayer through Jesus name, so that we can become his followers in recognizable ways. Let us faithfully gather here to worship Jesus together. Let us call on him in prayer, praise and thanksgiving that we might in every way possible be conformed to his image, ever more recognizable as being with him. And let us be bold in faith alongside Peter and John when we face the judgment of our culture. And in faith let us not be intimidated by attacks that are intended to undermine the work of the church in the world. You are after all the very children of God. You will be recognized for being with Jesus. You have been washed clean in the blood of the lamb. Your boldness is a natural part of your life in Christ. It is a life that begins right now. It is a life that will never end!

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.