

“Courage, Following God, and Very Necessary Risks”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. James D. Ross

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First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington

Scripture text: Acts 5:27-32

The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation.

27 The apostles were taken before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest began to interrogate them: 28 “We gave you strict orders not to teach about that name, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching—and you’re determined to make us responsible for this Jesus’ blood.” 29 To this, Peter and the apostles replied, “Better for us to obey God than people! 30 The God of our ancestors has raised Jesus, whom you put to death by hanging him on a tree. 31 This One, who has been exalted to God’s right hand as Ruler and Savior, is to bring repentance and the forgiveness of sins to Israel. 32 We are eyewitnesses to this. And so is the Holy Spirit, who has been given to those who obey God.”

Message:

Pope Francis died nearly a week ago on Holy Monday, the day after Easter.

In his Easter message the day before, he called for just and lasting peace in countries throughout the world, care and compassion for migrants, resources for the needy and hungry, and investments in development.

The 266th Pope was the first from the Americas, the first from the Southern Hemisphere, and the first since the 8th Century to have been born or raised outside Europe. An estimated 250,000 people attended his funeral yesterday.

I mention this not only because it is newsworthy and relevant, but also because I believe that the life and ministry of Pope Francis can be instructive as we explore today’s text.

I want to take us back to just seven days ago, when we gathered in this space and celebrated with fanfare the resurrection of Jesus. The women had gone to his tomb and found that the body was not there. Even more, they scandalously claimed he was raised from the dead and that they had seen him.

Fast forward to today’s pericope. Time has passed and lots has happened. The apostles, led by Peter, have been arrested and imprisoned several times for preaching about this Jesus and his resurrection. And now, they’re at it again.

The text tells us that the Sanhedrin have come to interrogate the apostles and are annoyed because they have told the apostles again and again not to teach in Jesus' name, but they keep doing it.

Now, there is debate among academics about specifics of the Sanhedrin, including its precise composition. We know, however, that this term could be applied to official Jewish councils that had religious, political, and judicial functions assigned to them under Roman rule in Palestine.

And today's text suggests to us that Peter and the apostles responded to the pressures from the Sanhedrin with clarity. They said: it is better for us to obey God than people.

Now, that sounds a bit like a "duh" statement. But I am not sure it was that simple.

You see, the apostles were considered repeat offenders by this point. They had recently escaped prison, and the elders and high priests had warned them at least twice to cut it out, to stop this healing ministry, to stop preaching that humankind could be saved by Jesus' name.

These were not simply theological statements. They were political confrontations.

For the Romans, Augustus Caesar alone was savior of the world and healer. To claim Jesus as a savior was to challenge or mock the royal titles. And that, friends, just would not do.

But Peter and the other apostles said: it is better for us to obey God than people.

I am struck by the courage that must have taken. Despite the risks to them, Peter and the others stuck to their beliefs and continued their work.

And this is why I thought of Pope Francis.

Listen, I know there are significant theological differences between the UCC and the Catholic Church. I know that many have critiqued Pope Francis, saying he didn't go far enough to transform the church.

But I also know this: it was considered radical for Pope Francis to say that people who are divorced, people who are queer, people who are transgender have a place in the church. That took courage.

It was bold to confront clergy sex abuse issue head-on, and that took courage.

It was unprecedented to eschew the trappings of luxury and privilege and to, instead, live modestly and simply to be in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. That, friends, was courageous.

For the last several weeks, we here at First Church have reflected on the notion of awe. Might we consider it a source of awe that God enabled Pope Francis to serve at a time when the world so needed his voice, his message, and his faithfulness?

And even as I celebrate the courage of Pope Francis, I think of the courage of immigrant families in this country, still trying to go to their jobs, still trying to educate their children, still trying to be active in their communities, and, when appropriate, check in with immigration officials, never knowing if they will be taken away without warning, even if they have done everything they were supposed to do. That takes courage.

I think of the people of all political parties, races, and ages who are showing up at town hall meetings in communities throughout the country to express their frustration, anger, and, at times, disgust about some of what they see happening at the hands of our federal government – and sometimes in our own hometowns. Those showing up at court hearings – as happened in Burlington – for people wrongly deported.

They do this even though they, like most of us, have seen images of people forcibly carted out of town hall rooms or added to enemy lists just for speaking their minds. That, I believe, takes courage.

I think of the transgender youths who board school buses, go to class, and live with as much authenticity as possible, even though their lives are treated as political fodder and public rhetoric diminishes their self-worth. That, my friends, takes courage.

Grace Lee Boggs, the late Chinese American philosopher, community organizer, feminist, and writer, said, “You don’t choose the times you live in, but you do choose who you want to be, and you do choose how you want to live.”

Friends, we get to choose who we want to be.

“Better for us to obey God than people,” the apostles said.

That was a radical and countercultural statement then, and it is a radical and countercultural statement today.

We often quote the words of Prophet Micah, and I think there is a good reason for this. Micah provides clarity about our calling in just a few phrases.

“God has told you, o mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

I want to suggest that Pope Francis provided us with an example of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly. Of course, I am not suggesting he was perfect, and I also understand that he operated within the confines of a centuries-old tradition.

But I believe he sought to be faithful.

And I also want to be clear that I am not suggesting that he is the first or only person to do this. We can point to many within our own UCC history and beyond. He is simply a high-profile example who can inspire others.

I think that type of inspiration is necessary right now, because there is an urgency to this moment.

You see, I don't think we are doing justice when we eliminate programs designed to ensure that people from underrepresented and underserved groups can at least be considered for college admission, jobs, and other opportunities that they have been historically denied because of racism, sexism, homophobia, ablism, and the legacies of slavery and other oppression.

It is important because when we are willing to cut or eliminate programs that serve the most vulnerable among us – such Medicaid, Head Start, and federal departments that enforce the laws regarding the education of children with disabilities - just so that we can pay for tax cuts for people with enormous wealth – or even tax cuts for ourselves - well, friends, I just don't think we are loving kindness.

It is important because when this country seeks to dominate sovereign nations and even engages in conversation about taking them over, whether Canada, or Greenland, or elsewhere, we are talking about colonization and conquest, which has nothing to do with walking humbly with God.

Of course, we needn't limit our thinking to major national and international issues.

How are we, right now, engaging with our neighbors? How are we challenging our loved ones - you know, the ones who sometimes get on our nerves and drive us batty - even when the conversations are difficult?

How much are we willing to invest to care for those in need in our local community?

Now, I know that this church is committed to justice and has lots of receipts to show it.

Still, how do we, not just as a church body but as individuals, seek to live out these values - yes, by showing up for the big things but also in the ways that we live our personal lives day in and day out when no one is watching or taking notes?

Perhaps those are the times that matter most.

Finally, friends, I want to mention one other point that seems to jump out from today's text:

Sometimes you must pay a cost to stand up for what you believe.

For Peter and the other disciples, that cost was jail.

For Pope Francis, the cost was that he was ostracized by many in the Catholic Church, some political officials, and others. Sadly, there were outrageous posts from some visible people in this country celebrating his death.

When I lead workshops or classes about justice issues such as race, sexual orientation, and juvenile justice, I am transparent with people who are passionate about becoming more involved. I tell them that it just might cost them.

Maybe, like the apostles, they will risk jail.

More likely, like Pope Francis, they will be ostracized. They might find their social capital decreased. They might be uninvited to some events. They might find their business prospects decrease.

Then again, because God is truly amazing, it might be just the opposite. After all, Costco and some other companies enjoyed tremendous booms in business when they recommitted to diversity, equity, and inclusion when others backed away.

Lots of people find that when they stand up for justice, their lives expand exponentially as they enter more authentic relationships with folks, connect with new kindred, and find healing for themselves.

I believe the reason this happens is that doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God is not just for the person on the other side. It is not even primarily for the person on the other side.

Doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God is principally about our own transformation and salvation.

And that means that maybe it is worth the risk. It means that maybe the apostles were wise when they said that it is better to follow God than people.

Now, as I prepare to end, I need to raise a challenge to today's text, for there is a problem. Peter accuses the Jewish religious leaders of being responsible for the death of Jesus, and this has often been interpreted in ways that perpetuate anti-Semitism.

Scholars tell us that Peter's criticism of these religious leaders reflects the conflict between apostles and the elite in Jerusalem.

Crucifixion, you will recall, was a form of death that agents of the Roman empire used to preserve their political and economic interests.

So, while it is possible that the chief priests collaborated with the Roman Empire in targeting Jesus, ultimately, he died at the hands of the Roman state because of the challenge he presented.

Scholars also tell us it is possible that Luke, the writer of Acts, shifted the blame to temple officials to make peace with the Roman Empire.

When he wrote the book of Acts, the Sadducees - or chief priests - would have been significantly less powerful than they had been before the temple was destroyed.

Since both apostles and Sadducees were existing under Roman occupation, this accusation essentially amounted to one oppressed group turning against another. And in doing so, they deflected from the role of the empire in perpetuating violence against citizens.

Raj Nadella from Columbia Theological Seminary writes, "Luke's proclivity to shift the blame for Jesus' death primarily toward the temple officials suggests that even a community like Luke's that practiced anti-imperial ethos can fall into the trap of allowing itself to be pitted against another marginalized community and, in the process, serving the interests of the empire."

Clearly, this is yet another lesson for us. In times of difficulty, we sometimes fall into the same trap. We turn against one another and others who suffer. Ultimately, that serves only those who maintain power.

We decide that poor people are the problem, or people of a different race or color, or folks who are not educated, or folks who didn't vote, or, or, or....

So, I offer this invitation to us all: the next time we feel tempted to do that, let's take a moment to reflect and ask ourselves:

Where am I displaying courage?

How am I committing to follow God instead of people?

What am I willing to pay for what I say that I believe?

Let us never forget that we ARE and Easter people and have been promised that we shall do even greater things than the Christ who came before us.

May the God we follow bless you for what you have done, what you are doing, and what you are yet being inspired to do.

Thanks be to God and amen!