

## Faith in a Free Society

(Acts 5:27-42 NRSV) When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, {28} saying, "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." {29} But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. {30} The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. {31} God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. {32} And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." {33} When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. {34} But 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. {35} Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. {36} For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. {37} After 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. {38} So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; {39} but 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, {40} and 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. {41} As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. {42} And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

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Today you were free to get up and come to church.

After church you could hand out faith poems at a soccer game.

You could stand outside of Casey's and greet people with the words "Jesus loves you."

We know and value the freedom that our constitution provides for the pursuit of our faith and our expression of it.

And yet there are ways that people of faith don't feel free to express their beliefs.

How much can teachers say to their high school students?

How much can college students write about their faith to their teachers?

One former Philosophy Department Chairman at the University of Southern California believes that there is a strong, anti-Christian bias in our country.<sup>1</sup>

Such a bias against Christianity may be a pendulum swing away from the former privileged position of Christianity in our country.

Or it may have something to do with the abuses of the church.

(God forgive the church whenever we have not been people of mercy and grace!)

Regardless of the political environment Peter and his colleagues remind us that a Christian is always free to respond to God.

When the Spirit freed Peter and the other disciples and told them to preach in the public square, they went and preached, knowing the possible outcomes.

When questioned by the highest Jewish court, Peter responded:

“We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

God is the Eternal One, our maker, redeemer and sustainer whom we shall meet and to whom we shall answer for our lives.

Our first duty, is always to God.

As we seek to obey God, it is important to know some of our current political geography.

There is today less and less a bias toward Christianity in our country.

If we raise the Christian flag in a discussion it is likely that everyone will not salute, some may actually shoot at it.

But you have the right to speak your beliefs and to argue for them.

The Archbishop of Denver wrote that doing less is not serving our country, but weakening it intellectually.<sup>2</sup>

Whether it is about

Abortion  
Capital punishment  
Excesses of capitalism  
Abuses of power

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<sup>1</sup> See Dallas Willard, “Being Christian in a Pluralistic World”,  
<http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=17>

<sup>2</sup> See Charles J. Chaput, “Faith and Politics”, <http://www.nd.edu/~afreddos/papers/chaput6.htm>

We have the freedom to speak and, as Archbishop Chaput argues, a moral duty as citizens to speak.

Peter's story reminds us that our freedom to speak does not guarantee freedom from consequences whether legal, political or personal, but a Christian speaks faithfully mindful of and accepting of such consequences.

In a time that embraces pluralism, we need to be reminded that because a person has an opinion or deeply felt convictions does not make it right or true.

Tom Cruise has the right to speak, but that does not make him right.

And whether people agree or not, Peter's encounter reminds us that Christians don't need the blessing of the ruling power for our faith to thrive.

John described our advantage this way, "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world".<sup>3</sup>

(Indeed, our witness may be more powerful when it is not the public line.)

It is important to realize what we strive for is something more than the opportunity to spout off.

If we are to share our good news in a way that people will listen, then we realize several things are important.

We need to be able to articulate clearly what we believe (as Peter did).

And effective communication is about more than what we say. The character of our lives will support our message or discredit it.

It is true that "who you are is speaking so loudly people cannot hear what you are saying."

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Before the high court, a respected Jewish teacher urged restraint among the judges. Gamaliel said that if these followers of Jesus were not of God then they would not succeed.

They did succeed as we know and have given us an example of the courage to speak their convictions and to accept the consequences.

That same spirit that freed them and called them to speak is the same spirit we meet in our prayers and in this celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Knowing God's love and mercy, we will likely be inspired to share our faith.

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<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:4

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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