



## Change, Reflection, & Mission

Acts 5:27-32

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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Again, good morning, and Happy Easter! While last Sunday may have been Easter Sunday, the season of Easter is a continual celebration of God's love made manifest in the resurrection of Christ lasting all the way through Jesus' ascension, which this year falls at the end of May. Throughout these weeks ahead, may we continue to be reminded that, indeed, Christ is Risen!

I was a bit torn this week as I was thinking over what this sermon might offer. As I shared at the end of March, I will be taking a 3-month Renewal Leave beginning next week, so today is my last opportunity to preach until August. I haven't had a one-month preaching break, much less a three-month break, in the past 12 years since I began preaching. So, admittedly, I spent some extra time this week trying to figure out in what direction this sermon should go.

As I considered the options, it felt like ignoring my upcoming leave discredited the change that is about to take place. Yes, I expect to be back in August, but things will be different for a while. In my absence, you'll be gifted with the preaching of the Rev. Dr. Michelle Holmes Chaney, who I will introduce next Sunday. As I've said before, change is good and healthy. Any organization, like any organism, that cannot adapt to change cannot withstand the test of time.

I also thought about reflecting back on the past 7 years – it's hard to imagine, but I've now been your appointed pastor for 7 years, having arrived in 2015. For me, this coming sabbatical feels like an opportunity to reset. As I look back, the past 7 years feel like a whirlwind experience, capped off by the past two-years of complete mayhem. I'm grateful for the chance to catch my breath, and to return at the end of summer to re-enter – to re-think – and to re-new our ministry together.

And also, as I think about what the coming months hold, I thought about how I might reiterate the promise that the mission and ministry of this church should not, and cannot, be tied into any one person's identity. My taking leave does not offer an invitation for the work of God in this community to take leave with me. In the Methodist Church, we believe that everyone – ordained or not – is empowered and gifted for the work of ministry. The Leadership Board will continue to lead; the staff will continue to offer support; and I hope ... and I expect that you all will continue to be witnesses to the work of God in this world as a congregational body as you live out our stated mission of *Making a Place for Everyone to Know God's Love*.

It might be a bold attempt, but – I am an Enneagram 3, so if I don't succeed, I will die trying – I think all three of these themes: *change*, *reflection*, and *mission* are possible to fit into one sermon (understanding, that might make it longer than usual). So, here we go:

Our text this morning comes from the book of Acts. It comes quite a bit later in the narrative than the resurrection – in fact, it comes after Jesus has ascended and gifted the early church with the Holy Spirit. In the first half of Chapter 5, we find that the disciples, empowered by Christ’s resurrection and the gifting of the Spirit, had been visible in the community offering healing, and exorcisms – curing those who were tormented by unclean spirits.

The visible work of the disciples had created a sense of jealousy by the high priest of the Jewish Temple. Because of his jealousy, the high priest had the disciples arrested and put into prison. The high priest – as witnessed in the decision to crucify Christ and imprison the disciples – was unwilling to accept that Christ, his teachings, and the belief of the disciples was a valid fulfillment of the prophecies regarding the way God was at work in the world.

Luke, as the author of Acts, makes a clear distinction between the high priest (a representative of the leaders of the Temple) and the Jewish community at large. Luke is not offering a criticism of Judaism writ large, but instead is calling out those with power in the institution. Luke also makes clear that the actions against the disciples “did not necessarily stem from strict adherence to the scripture, but rather from an imprudent reaction of self-preservation.”<sup>i</sup>

This is the greatest challenge we face with change – change is most often rejected and refuted by those who think they have the most to lose should change be embraced. I say “who think” they have the most to lose because the honest reality is that those who refute change usually don’t have that much to lose due to the change. For example, it is a farce to say that a multi-billionaire (or perhaps even a multi-millionaire) will become poor by paying more in taxes, a change that could significantly help those who have little income be able to afford healthcare and quality education for their children. Just consider MacKenzie Scott, who, over the past few years has given away over \$12 billion in grants and funding to non-profits, but whose net worth has increased during that time because of how well the rest of her \$50 billion has done in the stock market.

The list of concerns to this regard is lengthy in our nation today. We rebut change anytime we disagree with the change being made, claiming that somehow such a change would hinder our ability to thrive. Let’s consider a few examples: how does my marriage become less valuable or meaningful by allowing someone else to be married? How does a child’s gender identity in anyway impact another child’s understanding of self? Is there not enough work to be done in this nation that immigrants and citizens can work alongside one another? Is there not enough wealth in this nation that your ability to receive welfare does not actually impact my financial status? Does learning the truth about our nation’s history really impede our ability to live and work in a just and equitable world?

Change – even change for the better – is not always welcomed. Consider the change that is being rejected in this text.

The kind of change the disciples had embraced, which the high priest was so hesitant to accept, was that God – in and through the work of Christ – had proclaimed each and every one of God’s created humanity as being worthy and equal. Think back a ways: Christ was born to an unwed poor family; the shepherds were the ones who were first invited to visit Christ in the manger; in his ministry, Christ

dined with tax collectors and befriended Samaritans; and Jesus chastised the Pharisees for their lack of concern and care for the poor. And now, the disciples – these ragamuffin fisherman from Galilee – were the ones proclaiming God’s glory in the temple and performing miraculous acts of healing. Ultimately, the disciples were arrested because the high priest worried his authority was in jeopardy, failing to remember that his authority as a temple leader was only so good as he was able to profess the truth of God. In a false attempt at self-preservation he had the disciples arrested and jailed.

During the night after the disciples were arrested, an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought the disciples out, saying to them, “Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.” So the disciples, as quickly as they were jailed, were set free and instructed to continue proclaiming and witnessing to God’s love in Jesus Christ.

The very next morning, the high priest sought for the disciples to be brought before him and the elder council. The temple police went to the prison, but couldn’t find the disciples. They reported back that the disciples were not to be found in the jail – the guards were still standing there, the doors were still locked, but the disciples were not inside.

Amidst the confusion of the moment, another person showed up to announce that indeed, the disciples were in the temple teaching the people. The high priest ordered they be brought before the council.

It is here we engage our text for today, beginning in verse 27.

The disciples are found standing before the high priest and the temple council – those who had the power and authority over the Jewish community and, as Jerusalem was very much under Roman control at the time, this council has been granted the authority by Rome to maintain the Pax Romana in Jerusalem – the so-called “peace of Rome.”

The high priest chastises the disciples, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” (notice, he won’t say Jesus’ name, but we all know who he is talking about), “yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”

Again, we find, the authorities are not pleased that the disciples are unwilling to listen.

Standing there in the room with those who considered themselves the final authority on all things related to God, Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

I love the boldness of the apostles. I love that, standing in front of those who just weeks earlier had taken Jesus to be crucified by the local Roman officials, the disciples are not afraid to challenge their authority. The disciples have a mission, and they have been given the invitation to fulfill their mission, and so they will not let any authority stand in their way.

This past week, I was honored to receive the recognition of the local Mason lodge with the “Community Builders Award.” It’s a honor I share with all of you, as the work of community building is a shared mission. The lodge is named after two Masons who served Alexandria in the past; it is titled the Henry Knox Field - John Blair Lodge.

I don’t know the name John Blair, but Henry Knox Field was a dedicated member of this congregation at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As a part of receiving the award, I was invited to give a speech, and so I spent some time combing through our church history book to identify the ways in which Henry Knox Field served in the life of the church. I found that he served as the choral director and participated on many – MANY – different committees over a 30-year period. One of those committees was the Building Committee.

One thing I learned that I had not known before was that in 1895, the Building Committee considered selling this property and moving to another location. The building had remained in fairly rough shape after the Civil War, during which time the church was commandeered and utilized as a hospital. The building committee priced out what it would cost to sell the church and build on a new location. Ultimately, because of the expense, the decision was made to maintain this building, but to undergo a significant renovation. As a result, in 1899, the church was remodeled (another committee on which Henry Knox Field served). A few remnants of that remodeling still exist, including the current stained glass windows and the pews on which we sit.

The decision in 1895 to maintain this location sparked a line of memory for me. A similar decision was made in 1951, during which time the church was experiencing significant numerical growth and was considering a move to provide a church building that had integrated educational space as well as an on-site parking lot. Ultimately, the decision in the 1950s was to maintain this location and to build an education wing next door, stating that our location at the center of town was more important than having an on-site parking lot.

The education building – the one that is now under renovation for commercial purposes next door – was sold in 2013, 60 years after it was built. It was sold, in part, because, as a congregation, we didn’t have the funds to renovate or fix the building after some significant water damage.

I tell this history because of the way it impacts a decision that was made in 2015, prior to my arrival. As most churches experience, Washington Street has had its ups and downs over the years. 2015 was a down year – it came after a handful of down years.

Our ecclesial authority – those who perhaps are best representative of the high priest – made the recommendation that Washington Street become part of a cooperative parish with another larger local congregation. Our funding was down, our worship attendance was down, our ministries were hurting, and the authorities who oversee the conference thought it best we merge, giving administrative control to another congregation. They suggested an associate pastor from the other congregation serve as our pastor as something of a second-site for the other church.

Yet, like 1895 and 1951, an intentional decision was made – a decision that went against the recommendation of our denominational authorities. The leadership of the church maintained that, as an connectional – yet independent – congregation, God had a purpose and mission for us to pursue here in Old Town. We have maintained that conviction over the past 7 years as we have found new ways to be engaged in and with the local community.

That conviction stems from our clearly stated mission.

The apostles stood before the high priest and the temple council with such conviction, saying, “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus. ... God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, so that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

The disciples were willing to stand up in front of those who tried to have them silenced, because they were convicted by the love of God as witnessed in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ – and through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

As a congregation, we stand where we stand today because of this same conviction in the Biblical promise that God is Love, and that as a people of God in this space, in this community, in this city, our mission is to make a place for everyone to know that love. That will not always be easy, but it is our charge.

Theologian Anderson Jeremiah frames such a conviction in this way, writing, “Witnessing to love means standing for justice, and the unjust will not like it. Standing for truth will infuriate those who live by lies. Sometimes love and justice offends people; evil can seem for a while to be stronger than love, but the message of Jesus is that love overcomes all evil. Because Jesus practiced love, justice and mercy, the world hated him. No doubt that the followers of Jesus will face the same predicament. Being an apostle and witness of Jesus means making some unpopular choices. Especially when those choices are contrary to the values of the world. This is not about denying the world but challenging the world that has no place for the love and justice preached by Jesus.”

My friends, our mission sounds easy – “Making a Place for Everyone To Know God’s Love” – but such a statement is contradictory to a world that is creating more rules for exclusion than invitations for inclusion. The glory of God in the Easter promise is that no authority, no amount of rules or judgement, and no incentive to the contrary can stand before us as we proclaim that in Jesus Christ we find the ultimate change in the powers of the world. Like the disciples standing on trial, we proclaim that death and evil do not win out, but that justice and life shall reign forever. So I invite you to maintain your witness, be strong in your conviction, and as God’s people here at the corner of King and Washington, may we proclaim the good news, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that everyone may know God’s love. Amen; and Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Anderson Jeremiah. ““We are witnesses”: Embodying the Power of Resurrection.” <https://politicaltheology.com>. Retrieved April 19, 2022.