

## “The Wisdom of Gamaliel”

Acts 5:27-32

Richard C. Allen

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South Glastonbury

Connecticut

In the first year after Christ’s resurrection, the apostles were like children running home from the dentist with really good report cards, “Look Mom, no cavities!” They were alive to the good news of God’s reconciling love, and no amount of shushing was going to silence them. The neighbors had told them to “keep it down to a low roar” but these carried-away Christians couldn’t keep the lid on what they knew to be true. Finally, people with religious authority ordered Peter and the others to stifle their enthusiasm. They sounded like Archie Bunker telling Edith to “stifle it!”

But the apostles were giddy with the good news. They were like Charles Dickens’ Mr. Scrooge waking up on Christmas morning and nearly making a fool of himself, gibbering and jabbering; telling the world he had been changed; professing he had seen the light! He had this good news to share. He was moving from being a stingy, self-centered tight wad to becoming a person who sees the other’s pain and acts decisively with unbridled generosity. Scrooge is a good reflection of those first century carried-away Christians.

For Peter and the others, not even an official decree was an effective gag order. When you have a message that holds the potential to change the world, there’s no holding back!

I'm told that when the word came over the radio that there had been a surrender and that World War II was officially over, Mr. Ramaker got up from his chair in the South Congregational Church parsonage on Main Street, walked over here to the church, climbed to the bell tower and started ringing the church bell. I'm told he just wouldn't stop pulling on the rope. Even if the chief of police had asked him politely, Mr. Ramaker would have kept ringing that bell because the news of peace was just too astounding. He wasn't going to let up on the bell cord until the whole world had heard the sound of peace. One of his own sons had died in that conflict, and he was just so relieved that no one else would have to die.

When word reached the religious officials that Peter and the others had defied their direct order, they called a meeting to deliberate the matter and to make a decision on what to do with these law breakers, whether to throw them in jail or to execute them.

Into this official debate, Rabbi Gamaliel interjects a word of wisdom. Gamaliel was one of those wise leaders who didn't speak all that often, but when he did, people listened. He arose from that tradition of standing in awe of God, knowing that wisdom comes from no other place.

Rabbi Gamaliel quietly reminds the assembled officials that other messianic upstarts have come along, raised a ruckus, gathered a following, then fizzled out, never to be heard of again. He mentions two by name, Theudas and Judas the Galilean. We don't know much about these two except that they were messianic pretenders, charismatic leaders who claimed to be the Messiah, but proved to be otherwise.

Rabbi Gamaliel's wisdom is to let the hand be played out. If Jesus Christ is just another pretender in the long line of pretenders, the movement will peter out!

But, if this Jesus Christ person is, indeed, the Messiah, then the religious officials wouldn't want to be found opposing God! Would they? This wisdom sinks in quickly. They know he has spoken rightly. They grumble a bit. They give the apostles what amounts to a slap on the wrist, then choose to take a seat in the back row to see how this current messianic drama will play out.

Wisdom prevails in this story. It is Solomon who teaches us that wisdom begins by letting ourselves be awed by God's handiwork. I suppose the opposite of wisdom would be the foolishness that comes with looking upon all that God is doing and saying, "Eh, no big deal." Wisdom does not require a BA or a Master's degree or a PhD. Wisdom comes with opening oneself to the mind of God and being blown away by it; overwhelmed, awed, struck dumb by the vastness of God's beauty, the depth of God's love, the energy of God's power. Having wisdom is different from being street smart. It's not the same as being clever. It's not even the insight gained from the proverbial school of hard knocks. To gain wisdom is to stand before God and just tremble at what God is doing.

There isn't much that causes us to tremble these days. It's as if we're too smart now to be wise. Wisdom still begins with opening one's self to God's handiwork. A thunder storm, maybe, causes us to tremble. That moment when we first realize we've fallen in love causes us to tremble. When we turn out the light at night and kneel by the side of the bed and say a prayer for Darfur; that causes one to tremble. When we look up and see that the infant who has only been crawling on all fours is suddenly walking upright, staggering across the living room rug like a drunken sailor, it causes us to tremble.

This congregation has a long history with wisdom. Our forbearers opened themselves to the mind of God, and I am certain it caused them to tremble. I am certain it gave them the wisdom they sought.

I imagine there was some serious trembling when someone, in 1965, raised a hand and made a motion that we pick up the church and turn it from facing High Street to Main Street. Who ever heard of such a thing? But it was understood as a strategy for growth, a plan for enlarging the circle of those who were hearing and responding to the reconciling love of God. I'm sure some thought it was folly, but there was wisdom in it.

There was some serious trembling when someone said in 1993, "Let's bring the High Street School back from the dead; let's tear off the ruined addition, bring the historic section up to code, and make it a place for children, and for pastoral counseling, and a place where the community can gather once again." Who ever heard of such a thing? But it was understood as a strategy for growth, a plan for enlarging the circle of those who were hearing and responding to the reconciling love of God. Some thought it was folly, but there was wisdom in it.

Now, we have come to a new day. We are talking once again about what God has in mind to widen the circle of those who are hearing and responding to the reconciling love of God. We are talking about all the stairs, all the elevations. We are talking about the limitations stairs place on many people of all ages. It seems to many of us that God is asking us to see if there is a way to widen the circle once again by finding a way to overcome the barriers to our classrooms and meeting spaces.

The whole church has been invited to talk about this over the next several weeks and months, beginning with two Listening Sessions at 11:45 next Sunday and the following Sunday.

My prayer is that Rabbi Gamaliel will be attending those Listening Sessions, that the voice of Wisdom will be heard. If this matter of accessibility is idle chatter such as that surrounding Theudas and Judas of Galilee, the messianic pretenders, the conversation will evaporate.

But if this topic card, this concern for accessibility, is of God's devising, if it is a matter of justice, then we would do well to open ourselves to the trembling.

There will be much to say about accessibility and what it means for a physically challenged person to have full access to the ministry of our church. Some of the stories will cause us to tremble. Some of the stories will cause us to debate. Some of the stories will cause us to doubt. May all of the stories, taken together, allow us to discern how God is leading us into the future, giving us cause for trembling once again. In the greatest of hope, Amen!