

Sermon Draft

Text: Acts 5:29–42

Sermon: “Witness”

The appointed readings for the Second Sunday of Easter call us to witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the *Gospel*, Jesus appears to his disciples in the Upper Room, instructing them: **“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you”** (John 20:21).

The *Epistle* expects that Christians will be faithful witnesses and reminds us that in the process we may be distressed by **“various trials”** (1 Peter 1:6).

The sermon text, the *First Reading* (as Easter season takes us through lessons in Acts), challenges us to witness by proclaiming repentance and remission of sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Luther was to be martyred. In 1505, young Martin Luther entered the monastery. Within three years, he was ordained a priest. Soon after, Luther was sent on a trip to Rome, where he was sickened by the moral corruption there.

In 1512, Luther received a doctorate in theology and was appointed professor of Holy Scripture at Wittenberg.

Luther spent long hours studying the Psalms, Romans, Hebrews, and Galatians. The more he studied the Word of God, the more he could not agree with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Specifically, Luther disagreed with the teaching that man plays a role in accomplishing his own salvation through the conduct of good works. Neither could he agree that the pope had the authority to forgive sins through the selling of indulgences.

On October 31, 1517, Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses. They were written in Latin for academic debate. However, they were soon translated into German and distributed across the country. Immediately, Luther was called a heretic by friars and priests throughout the land. Many cried out for his public execution. Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor; Charles V, later Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain; and Pope Leo X all demanded that Luther be silenced.

As our Scripture readings, this morning reminds us that as Christians today we are God's witnesses, sent into the world. It was true for the first disciples. It was true for Luther almost five hundred years ago. Regardless of the opposition of our society or dangers of our surroundings, we obey God rather than men. We declare that salvation is given as a gift to those who believe in Christ Jesus, the crucified and risen Savior.

Luther was summoned to Augsburg to meet with his cardinal. Cardinal Cajetan showed Luther a papal bull written by Leo X. It announced the pope's right to sell indulgences for forgiveness of sins. Also, it declared that faith was not necessary for one who receives the Sacrament.

Luther responded that popes and councils have erred and even contradicted one another. They should be obeyed only when their pronouncements conform with Scripture.

In today's Gospel, John tells how Jesus met with his disciples in the Upper Room. Jesus showed them his wounds and greeted them with God's peace. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Then, Jesus gave them a simple command, "***As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you***" (v 21). Jesus breathed on them, blessing them with the Holy Spirit.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we catch a glimpse of the disciples doing what Jesus had commanded. Peter and the disciples had been teaching and preaching in the temple. They were brought by guards before the Sanhedrin and told that they must not preach about Jesus anymore. But Peter and the disciples refused to obey the Jewish Council.

Even though they were standing before the religious, political, and judicial rulers of their day, the disciples openly declared that they would obey God rather than men.

The disciples witnessed to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. They named Jesus the source of life and author of salvation. God had made the disciples to be witnesses for Jesus Christ and so had the Holy Spirit, who now lived within them!

It is extremely important to take note of the message that the disciples proclaimed. It was both Law and Gospel. That is, it not only declared what wonderful things Jesus had done; it declared what terrible things the Sanhedrin had done. The disciples confronted the Jewish council with the reality of their sin before God.

“The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree” (v 30). With these words, the disciples confronted the Sanhedrin with the truth that they had opposed God.

They had rejected God’s Messiah by humiliating and murdering him. This was their personal sin against God, Scripture, and Israel.

At the same time, the disciples proclaimed the truth of God’s wondrous Gospel that was now being offered to each man of the Sanhedrin. God had exalted Jesus to his right hand and made Jesus the Author and Savior of life.

The words of the disciples were a direct appeal to the Sanhedrin to repent and have faith in Christ, for the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of eternal life. The Holy Spirit inspired the disciples to speak, and the Holy Spirit empowered the Word of God to be effective.

The Bible doesn't record what happened in the hearts of the councilmen. We know Gamaliel immediately spoke on behalf of the disciples. Also, we know that later, some Pharisees and some of the Sanhedrin became Christians.

In the months after facing Cajetan, Luther would work at a feverish pace. He continued teaching and preaching, researching and writing, publishing and debating. The volume of material he produced is astonishing. By 1520, he was on record as disputing the infallibility of the pope, attacking Rome's theology of the sacraments, and defining his position on justification and good works.

Leo X answered by condemning Luther as a heretic and issuing a bull of excommunication. Luther's response was to burn the papal bull. In 1521, Luther was summoned to appear before the Diet of Worms. Ordered to recant, he would not. Within days, the emperor declared him an outlaw and heretic, thus permitting anyone in Germany to kill him.

Luther was to be martyred! By God's grace, he was not killed. He lived to be sixty-two years of age. Of course, he did not know that he would live that long.

What he knew was that powerful forces were arrayed against him, seeking to silence him. So, why didn't Luther just stop? Why didn't he quit speaking and writing and teaching and preaching? Why didn't he move to some quiet place where no one could find him, and just keep quiet?

Before the Council dismissed the disciples, they were flogged. They were ordered not to speak about Jesus anymore. But the disciples were not discouraged; just the opposite. They left ***“rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name”*** (v 41). They were honored to be dishonored for the name of Jesus. Instead of ceasing their witness, they never stopped teaching and preaching Jesus. Every single day they witnessed, in public, in the temple, and in private, from house to house.

We are witnesses. We’ve looked at the witness of Martin Luther and the testimony of the apostles. These are our examples; this is our heritage. Like them, we have been called by Christ and inspired by the Spirit to be witnesses. We have been sent into our world, our culture, our time.

Truly, we must confess that we do not witness as forthrightly as we should. We can be daunted by the opposing words or condemning actions of those who don't believe in Christ. We can be tempted to remain silent or inactive.

But we will not be silent. Even though we may receive rejection or dishonor, we will obey God rather than men. We will proclaim salvation as a gift through the crucified and risen Savior, Jesus Christ. We are his witnesses!

Amen