

ACTS 5:12-16

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". . .THE PEOPLE HELD THEM IN HIGH HONOR."

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Mark Dunn used to be a barber. Did you know that? I can't get a haircut without him commenting on it. If you knew that about Mark, you won't be surprised to know that he compares the Christian Church to a little boy who is about to get his first haircut. He and I were talking about the Church one day--the whole Church, throughout the world--and Mark said this to me--I wrote it down--"Christianity is going in for its first haircut and it's afraid. Because it's not sure what it will look like when it's over--but it has got to be done, because Christianity is overgrown and all tangled up."

"But the people held them in high honor."

The Christian Church is in a mess. It is fragmented with denominationalism, paralyzed by institutionalism, and wracked with self-righteousness. The Congregational Way is in some ways the very worst about all of this. Individual Autonomy has become our golden calf, revered in many quarters more than the unity in Christ that demands self-giving and self-sacrifice in a community of love. And it's time we dealt with this mess in our corner of the world.

But let's start with some givens. It is a given that attendance is down the week after Easter--it is a given that attendance is down when senior minister is not preaching. And it's a given that when there is a time change, numbers will be down. In fact, were it not for an alert ex-barber, this minister would have been late today. All of this is to say that you are a particularly committed group of people. That will be good for you to remember as we proceed today.

The picture given to us in our scripture reading this morning--a picture of the ways of the early Church-- has a lot to say about the church of today.

It used to be that people held the church in honor. The Church was the source of hospitals and universities, and it dealt not only with how to live in the world, but how to relate to things that are beyond this world--real spiritual and transcendent matters. Those in the church understood themselves to be dealing with life and death matters.

In the verses preceding this morning's scripture, we are shown the apostle Peter, condemning Ananias and Sapphira--and upon hearing his words, they fall down and die. Peter dealt with life and death. With life and death and signs and wonders! God was too holy to be lied to, as Ananias did, and God was capable of great miracles and

wonders.

I know few people who see the Church of today as regularly dealing with life and death matters. But we do. From baptisms to funerals we care and are involved. But so many in our world only see that we gather for fellowship--that is, we are a social people. But we are also a people who worship--as long as our worship conforms to an established pattern. Heaven forbid the thought that signs and wonders might be performed here. My guess is that most of us would be embarrassed to hear one of our people begin to speak in tongues, or witness a physical healing as part of our Sunday morning time together. And, honestly, I suppose I would blush at it too. We are an institution with tax exempt status that exists . . . I'm not sure why we exist. I guess the reasons are different depending upon the individual. We exist to be God's people--what does that mean? We exist to maintain the idea that there is more to our existence than meets the eye--to remind people of the spiritual realm. We exist to be a moral voice in our society. But it doesn't appear as though we exist to be a place where signs and wonders may be performed. At least not signs and wonders of the external kind. Who's to say what internal miracles take place; what transformations and moments of enlightenment. And, believe me, I take comfort in that thought.

Come to think of it, I can't think of too many external miracles that would impress us these days. Were I to point at someone and condemn them because they had lied to God--and if they then fell over dead, I'm sure we would be amazed. But I imagine because we would see coincidence rather than spiritual power. Most Churches I know don't spend a great deal of time addressing the mystical and miraculous side of the spiritual life. Not head on. We say, "Pray" in the face of pain and adversity. But we rarely say "dream dreams, because that is one of the ways God talks to us." And we rarely say, "tell us about your visions and healings, so we might know of the signs and wonders of God." And yet we ought to. The transcendent life has power and people are crying out to know more about it. You can see it in the decline of mainline church membership, where three hymns and a sermon about daily living constitute most worship experiences. My goodness, sometimes I think God must even be bored. And the growth of the new age movement is telling of deep spiritual need. Sometimes I get the feeling that the Church is not doing her job.

"But the people held them in high honor."

Do people hold the Church in honor today? My first inclination is to say "no". Religion is not allowed in the public schools, not in government, it's not especially welcomed in the news media or the entertainment

industries--not unless a disclaimer is given that suggests, "this is a religious production so expect something different from what you normally get in the world". All of this says to me that, no, the Church is not held in particularly high honor, and that the real spiritual concerns of the vast number of people in the world are not being respected as valid concerns. And if there is anything that shows what little honor is given to the Church it's the way minister's are portrayed on television and in the movies. Ooo I just hate it!

Upon reflection, however, I'm inclined to say, yes, the church is held in honor, at least to this extent: the Church is held in high honor in very much the same way it was in the time of Peter. Look at the text again. It tells us that the people were witnessing signs and wonders being performed by the apostles but "None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high honor."

Doesn't that just make you sick. "Sure the church is valuable," we hear, "necessary for our society, but I don't go to church much myself." Surveys show that people in our country claim a belief in God and see the church as important to our lives here, and yet there are so many that won't dare join a church--who hesitate to attend one. And it gets worse.

Look at the text again--"And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, . . . so that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and pallets that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them.. . .and they were all healed."

"None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high honor." It sounds to me like the people were glad to get the benefits of getting healed, but were not about to be identified with this man Peter, or his leader, Jesus.

Maybe not that much has changed, though I can't remember the last time that people clamoured to get into my shadow. Don't misunderstand me. Society still honors the clergy. Why I can walk into a room and the talking will stop. I suspect I miss out on some juicy gossip because of that.

Though Peter and the apostles did their work among people, many of which were unwilling to commit to the message they brought, which is very much like today, I still wonder if we as the church are doing our job.. And here's why:

Consider the text one more time. In the verses after our reading, we are told this: "But the high priest rose up and all who were with him, that is, the party of the Sadducees, (who were part of the establishment of the day, a

kind of religious aristocracy) and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the common prison."

Who is jealous of us today? I think it may be a striking indicator that we are not doing our job, if no one is jealous of us. [11:00 But we are the established religious authorities now. Maybe we should ask, not who is jealous of us, but rather, of whom are we jealous?] But then, again, we're part of the establishment now. In the time of Peter and Jesus, they were outside the establishment.

So we might ask, does being part of the establishment make us less effective as the church? Those church bodies that exist in oppressed societies seem more vital and united than does the Church in America. My reading suggests that people in those societies do hold the Church in high honor. Is Christianity in America being hurt by all the freedom she has? It is an unsettling question.

I looked at this picture of the early Church and how the people responded to it--They saw something of value, they wanted to benefit from freely given grace, but they were unwilling to risk for the life and death issues it raised. I looked at that picture, and I saw a picture of today's church as well. Establishment or not, the Church can still offer something to this world. But I'm convinced that we will need to perform signs and wonders before we will be held in high honor. And the questions then become, "Which signs and wonders are we going to perform?"

[9:00 ending]

In this church, Dr. Muth sometimes says, that it doesn't much matter what we do in this meeting room, if we don't take it out there, into the world. Let me add to that. It doesn't mean much what we do in here, unless we take it out there, AS THE CHURCH. It is all well and good to be inspired to action. But we have a choice. We can act as individuals, maintaining our cherished individual autonomy, gaining a great deal of personal satisfaction and glory, or we can use our autonomy to surrender our autonomy, for awhile, to act as the church, performing signs and wonders, so that the people will hold the church in high honor, so that God might be glorified. Can it be done in the independent and often fragmented Congregational way? I don't know.

In this place we have pockets of commitment where people unite to do God's work in the world--one example is the St. Vincent dePaul servers. Another are those who work at Habitat for Humanity, and there are others. And that involvement is a good thing. But I get tremendously frustrated at the Congregational way when it appears incapable of being a body united in cause and action. And

yet, I value our autonomy as well.

You, the committed few, can at the very least, raise the questions in the world--among your friends--in the halls here. And perhaps in this one thing, Congregationalist can unite: in sharing the signs and wonders of our fellowship--not as individuals only--but as willing members of one body. Unity is, in and of itself, a great wonder. This is my challenge for you: to determine why you exist as a church and then, to unite so that you might fulfill that purpose. And in seeing the sign of unity, the people just may hold us, as the Church, in high honor.

amen.

[11:00 ending]

At this point the sermon changes. In the first service I expressed my own frustration with the Congregational way that seems incapable of uniting together as a Church to perform these signs and wonders. But that's not the real question. People know that we take our Christian lives out into the world. It just occurred to me a moment ago that the question for us is not "what signs and wonders will we perform?" Rather, it is "will the people join in commitment, or will they come to the church just for the benefits?" like the people did in Peter's day.

And the real point has nothing to do with my frustration over the Congregational way or my cynicism about the way the world responds to the church. In the first service I said that maybe people will hold us in honor if they see us uniting in fellowship. But they see that. That's not the point either. The real point is found in the scripture we read today. I paraphrase: The people didn't dare join with Peter, but they held him and his work in high honor. Many came unwilling to join, but very willing to accept the benefits of the faith, and then the last line, ". . . and they were all healed."

The real point answers the question, "Will they join or just come for the benefits?" Because it doesn't matter whether the people who come to God with a need are willing to commit to the Church or not. The real point of all of this is that God's healing love extended to them all without conditions. They were all healed! Praise be to God, they were ALL healed!

amen.