

Fighting the Good Fight

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Scripture Reading: Acts 5:12-20, 25-34, 38-42

Before reading today's Bible verses, I felt lead by God to share a few things. As our country is in turmoil, we not only mourn the over 100,000 deaths due to COVID-19, grieving with all who have lost a loved one, we also give thanks for the many lives saved, the doctors and nurses and health care workers and all who have done their part to keep the necessary products, food, and care we need, which includes sanitation workers, truckers, farmers, all store and restaurant workers. Let us all also pray for those who have the duty to serve and protect. I will say more about this just a little later, but right now I ask us all to pray for our police officers who not only face difficult and life-threatening situations on a regular if not daily basis, but need our prayers also, especially as they grieve what has and continues to happen.

We are thankful that as we have and continue to do our part in Michigan, our stay-at-home order has been lifted. Though we are still to keep gatherings indoors to 10, and restaurants are allowed 50% capacity (as I understand) with socially safe distancing and measures, different is that churches have been allowed, even before the stay-at-home order was lifted, to do as they deem fit, which we know has been differently as well as had various results. Our Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church said after the stay-at-home order was lifted that churches can begin in-person worship services. Our Church Council had our second planning meeting the day after the stay-at-home order was lifted. And with continued preparations we plan to have our first service in-person worship service at church on June 21. We will send everyone details by email and regular mail for those who do not have email.

Our country has also be wrestling and grieving with so much, even more so in the past weeks. I did not address this in last week's message because I had recorded it sooner than usual, and before I had heard about and watched video of the tragic death of George Floyd. It was a time I was taking a break from news and social media. And when praying about it, I felt lead felt by God to not re-record but rather speak about it today. We grieve his death, and many others who should not died for either nothing or something that did not warrant lethal responses. Let us grieve with their family and friends, as well as all of our Black brothers and sisters who are afraid as well as angry for what they have been suffering most recently and throughout our country's history. I, as we all do, grieve that in light of violence that in the midst of peaceful protests, there has been violent ones too. Understanding there are so many emotions, so many responses, so many things we understand and see as well as do not understand and witness, I am asking all of us to kneel before God, whether physically or in our hearts, and pray together, even when we feel sad, hurt, angry and as if we're fighting when we should join together. I know this is not easy, but as followers of Christ we are called to do things that without God's help we could never do. Christ is our example and our Leader, our Shepherd, our Lord, our Teacher, and among many things also our Savior and Savior of the world.

Now I return to asking us to also pray for the families of officers, those who do their duty to serve and protect each and every day. The men and women in uniform are our brothers and sisters too. So we especially pray for the family, friends and colleagues of the four officers who have been charged and are in custody facing criminal charges in the death of George Floyd. Pray for all those who love them and are in shock, those who wished such an act never happened, and those who are living and continuing to working as they grieve what their loved ones did that was antithetical to their vows as officers. Let us all pray for them too as we all are shocked and wished what they did never happened.

As we all wrestle with all that has happened since last week, I ask you to allow God's Holy Spirit to work within you, helping you sense and know Jesus is with you and even holding your hand with his nail-pierced hand so that when you respond as you talk with people, as you write on social media, and as you live with those you may be in disagreement, that you will speak as if Christ were speaking through you. This is not easy, especially when others are not speaking and treating you and others as we should. Following the ways of Christ and his grace, forgiveness and salvation are the only ways we can help bring hope and healing rather than despair and more hurts.

As you pastor, I wanted to share all of that with you as we journey through this as one church family.

Here now is today's Scripture reading. This is one of the longest selection of verses of the Bible I've used. So, I pray that you will be able to envision as best as possible what happened as you hear these words. From the 5th chapter of Acts:

¹²Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, ¹⁵so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. ¹⁶A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

¹⁷Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, ¹⁸arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, ²⁰"Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life."

²⁵Then someone arrived and announced, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" ²⁶Then the captain went with the temple

police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

²⁷ 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.

[And Gamaliel said...]

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.

Now, before I ask you this question, please know I want you to keep your answer to yourself. Also, if you’re with others, not use this as a way to force someone you know to answer this question. Please remember and know that God does not judge you for the answer you have in your own mind because as we have confessed to God our sins, we know we are forgiven. Among the various verses through which God speaks to us about this is Psalm, chapter 103, verse 12 that reminds us, “as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.”

So with such confidence of God’s forgiveness, I ask again, what’s the worst thing you have ever done in your life?

Well, talk about starting a Sunday message off with a bang, right? Typically I start with a smooth beginning, maybe a gentle question, touching portion of Scripture, moving story, or personal experience.

However, today I felt led by God to ask for all of us to think about, “What is the worst thing you have ever done in your life?” Just let that question settle with more of the grace of God than anything else.

Now, you may not know this, but I have been to prisons, yes plural. And I’ve actually been to prisons more times than you could guess. You may be wondering what I’m talking about. Well, I never was arrested or was put in jail for any misconduct, but I visited prisons as a chaplain. As a prison chaplain I visited Michigan prisons to lead worship services, talk with those who wanted or needed, and on rare occasions was personally requested to visit.

I’d also take time to speak with those in prison, listen to all they wanted and needed to say, and pray for them and their families. As you can imagine, I heard all sorts of stories that would make one not only wonder what was wrong with this world and some people, but also why we’d put people in prison when most others were not imprisoned for the same minor crime. Meaning there were certain people who did the same crime but due to certain factors, they were charged with the maximum extent of the law rather than being given a simple warning, a fine, maybe community service, or something else. In a previous church, while I was more active as a prison chaplain, we had those who were given such community service sentences do their service at the church under my supervision. I have to say it truly opened my eyes even more to things I had heard about but never thought was true. That truth was that depending on factors as where you live, how much money you make, and even what you look like can determine how you are treated, from the moment there are suspicions to the final sentence.

In today’s Scripture reading we find that the apostles who had done nothing wrong except preach the gospel, were not only threatened but also arrested and placed in a public jail. We read that the high priests were jealous since the apostles had the power to heal the sick and those tormented by evil spirits. They were of course enraged when the apostles pointed out what they did wrong in having Jesus crucified, the Messiah they were preaching and proclaiming while healing so many.

So to the question I asked, “What is the worst thing you have ever done?” though I am not saying you should shout it out loud or if you know of someone else’s worst act should not be yelled from the roof of your house, there are times when for the sake and love of others, the story needs to be told.

We know from last week on the day of Pentecost that when Peter addresses the crowd with the same gospel and confronting everyone with the fact they had been part of Jesus’ crucifixion, the people cried out what they should do in response of being convicted. Peter said in Acts 2, 38-39, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”

But in this case with the high priests, things went from bad to worse because they got so enraged when Peter spoke the truth boldly placing the blame on them for Christ's death. They were so enraged that they wanted to kill Peter and all the apostles right there and then.

You think this was madness. But you know from the Bible that eventually, and tragically so sad, that many if not all the apostles were killed over time for preaching the gospel by those who still would not repent, not believe and not come to peace with God and those they were to minister to and with. You know that it happened throughout history, including in recent history and it happening in certain parts of the world even to this day how Christians are persecuted. It's hard to let it hit home unless you know of someone who has been killed for following Jesus. And you know I was surprised when I told my parents that I decided to go into ministry that my mother told me her father was killed for his faith as a leader and pastor for not renouncing his faith in Jesus Christ.

Surprisingly, those who do have and continue to persecute Christians somehow do not think they are doing anything wrong. They take the power that they have, with no real accountability to anyone, and do as they see is right in their own eyes.

Remember the story of Saul who was passionate about capturing and persecuting Christians. Thank God that Saul was powerfully converted and his name was changed to Paul, one of the greatest apostles of Christ.

We must all pray that those who are acting and fighting against God and God's way are met by Jesus in one way or another, that we all can witness the power of God to change those who need to be. I pause here and say that throughout the Bible there are times when we see God do things that are hard to accept but understand. For example, God hardened Pharaoh's heart when Moses sent plagues after plagues as God commanded. Pharaoh almost let them go, but then was hardened in heart. And after all the first-borns were killed among the Egyptians, they gave the Israelites their freedom, but then Pharaoh's heart was enraged so that they pursued the Israelites after setting them free, only to die in the Red Sea.

But we do not the plans, the ways things can or should go. So we must pray and pray and pray. We must do our part in being ambassadors of Jesus Christ and his saving grace and peace. We must when we see others fighting find ways to bring one another together and for unity, even when it seems absolutely impossible and even you feel like you cannot find any common ground.

Thank God that we do not have to do it alone. We find something very powerful at the end of this time in which the apostles were persecuted. It wasn't something but someone. A man named Gamaliel who was one of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, and more importantly one who was respected by all the people, spoke words of wisdom to avoid bloodshed, as well as allow the apostles to do what the other people who were not of power, who were not part of the group who had Jesus Christ crucified. They were the everyday citizen, not the leaders but the

citizen who actually wanted and needed to be healed and saved. Sadly, sometimes leaders get lost in the leading that they forget the ones they are leading and what they need the most.

I can understand how difficult it is to lead, to try and to love and care for everyone. So no judgment, only prayers and words that need to be shared and proclaimed, even if it is to speak the truth that will open eyes, change hearts, and systemic problems that are so ingrained.

Like I said, Christians would be, as in some places they still are, persecuted. However, near the beginning of the first Christians being killed, God used Gamaliel to spare the lives of the apostles who would have otherwise been killed that day. He found a middle ground so that there would be no bloodshed, that some embarrassment would be spared, and more importantly that the people in need could be healed and saved if they wanted.

Gamaliel convinced the leaders who wanted death to see how as they all believed in God, but of course some did not believe in Jesus Christ, that if the apostles were in fact of God, which their healing powers definitely showed evidence of, that they would be fighting a losing battle against God!

This of course does not mean we do not fight against such evils that seem to continue even though we fight it such as domestic and child abuse, crime, or other evils that seem to get worse are of God because we cannot fight or stop it.

Rather is about whether or not we are actually fighting the good things that for some reason we may not see as of God. Gamaliel could see a bigger picture of what was being fought was not for many good reasons, but rather bitterness and anger for being called out in the death of Jesus, as well as jealousy that people were flocking to the apostles, receiving needed help and healing, and becoming believers and followers of Jesus Christ.

I know that for the Pharisees who wanted the apostles dead, they were also feeling threatened for being exposed for the worst thing they had ever done. They did not find a way to confess, to grieve, and to find forgiveness. They simply lived with the guilt, but no doubt did not want to be reminded of it. They wanted to shut it up and shut it down.

The crazy thing was God would not let them go until they confessed it. And if you read the scriptures carefully, and as we read from last week's message, there were those who did hear, who were convicted, who confessed, repented, gave up the shame and guilt and followed Jesus. Instead of persecuting followers of Jesus, they began fighting the good fight. And of course, they experienced the persecution they had once done unto others.

Instead of fighting God, they fought for God. Instead of pursuing followers of Jesus Christ to shut them up or kill them, they were people who fought the good fight of the faith as we are all called to do in 1 Timothy 6:12.

Again, the Pharisees that could not own up to their sin, their part in Christ's crucifixion and death, and could not put away their jealousy and rage. So they continued to want more than wanting the apostles arrested, quieted, and punished. They wanted them dead.

In James chapter 4, verse 1-2 tells us this:

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

When it comes to violent acts such as killing and murder, they are acts that stem deep from not getting what one wants. We are not talking just about complaining or not getting something you are earnestly seeking in faith and love for.

This is an entirely different level to which we see in the actions of the Pharisees who had the power to do almost whatever they wanted, including having the apostles killed for their preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, whom they had crucified for claiming to be the Son of God, King of all Kings, and all that no human can claim.

I know this is one of the heaviest messages I've ever preached. Believe me, when selecting Bible verses in advance, in knowing when Pentecost Sunday is each year, remembering to wear red as I did last week, and in knowing not only was there great and powerful acts that led thousands to be saved in one day on that day of Pentecost, I also knew there was persecution to follow which led to many deaths of Jesus' followers who were fighting the good fight of Jesus Christ.

Who knew that as I was preparing for this time in our Christian calendar that we'd still be battling COVID-19, that we would have a spike in our nations long history of battling within ourselves on how we treat one another, from the days of slavery in the 1600s, the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, and now the terrible tragedies and continued protests that are waking our nation up again to what we still must struggle through until we unite as a nation rather than be spilt more. I know there are many other struggles we can and should address. Yet this one is currently ripping our beloved nation apart.

I do not have all the answers. Many do not have the answers in the face of all the various sides, opinions, and approaches. But we can pray, we can continue to one another, strive to understand when there is misunderstanding, and to love those we find hard to love. It's tempting to say forget it. If you do this, then gloves and the Holy Spirit come off. If Jesus did that when arrested, persecuted, flogged, and crucified, none of us would be saved. If the apostles did that, then we would not have had the saving gospel of Jesus Christ come to us nor to the rest of the world.

We surely cannot do it on our own. The disciples of Christ did not. In fact, Christ did not do it on his own. Sure, he did what he only could do in dying for our sins. Yet, Jesus called disciples, and for them to make disciples, so that they could spread the saving and good news to all.

And they were told to wait until God's Holy Spirit entered them and gave them God's power in order to go and do, even if it meant dying for the sake of saving others.

Unfortunately in our world there are people who want others to not only be quieted but to be dead. Unfortunately I have been so shocked to hear a very few number of Christians say they wished certain people dead and gone. To be honest, I say something like they don't truly mean it. But then I also wonder if push came to shove if they would want me dead. I know that sound so extreme, but look at what happened in the Bible, to the disciples. And then also look at what is happening today.

This is not the way of Christ.

Fighting the good fight of the faith looks like many things. And today I want you to think about the actions of Gamaliel. Though you might think fighting the good fight for Jesus looks more like what the apostles were doing as they were being persecuted and threatened with death. Remember what Gamaliel did as he found a place for peace, even if it was for a time. He allowed for angers to subside, for the apostles, who were freed though sadly beaten before they were. We know how God's angles set them free to preach again in the same place they were arrested so that they could also heal those who came to them with sicknesses and unclean or evil spirits.

I don't know about you, but there have been times when I've been put in situations where I was being pushed to take sides and even begin to fight. I have been put into corners, so to say, to try and put me in place that would pressure me to help make disagreements into wars. I have been asked questions to which I knew no matter what I said there would be a reason for the one asking the question to make into a fight.

But as Christ did, we must all be willing to take the hits, to be misinterpreted for our acts and words of love, we must be willing even though it is very, very unlikely in our country and in our times, to actually be threatened, hurt or even die for fighting the good fight.

The apostles said they had to obey God rather than human authority. This is one of the most difficult things to do. When human authority goes against God's ways and will, we have to choose for that moment, that situation, that cause, or for a particular person or group of people. It's not often that when you stand up for what is wrong that you have to worry about what others will do to you. It's not often you have to worry about the well-being of your family, friends, and community by your choices in word and actions.

There was a protest in the Village of Carleton. There was word about it on social media. And the most awful words and cursing were spewed out. I became afraid for those who were going to have a peaceful protest. I was not afraid of the protesters as much as those who were so angry using words of violence. I'm not foolish. I know of the protests around our country that have become violent, where not only citizens were hurt, but officers too. These are most uncertain times.

When the group of protesters walked in front of our house about an hour after the time that was shared on social media, our daughter saw them and we all went out to cheer them as they walked by. They were about 15 young adults. Police Johnson had met them at Ash Carleton Park, discussed the issues with them, then helped them safely walk down Monroe Street as he followed behind them in his police car.

Remember Gamaliel? I also remember those in our Scripture reading that not only who were mad and upset and jealous for various reasons, but also calling for deaths. I also remember those who were sick, in need of healing, release from unclean spirits, and of course the saving of their very souls.

When we look at what is happening in our country right now, let us focus on fighting the good fight rather than fighting each other. Sure, let us debate, even argue with loving and caring hearts that seek the best for each other and for those who need our help and support, everyone who needs our help and support as followers of Jesus Christ.

And let us fight well the good fight, at times being like Gamaliel who ended up calming a situation rather than making it worse, confronting with pointing to God and how we can chose to fight with God or against God.

No doubt it's sometimes hard for us to put ourselves in other's shoes. Jesus made it quite clear that it's hard for us to remember that we were once spiritually poor, in need of help and salvation, and that we have grown in faith when we once used to not have much faith. So when we are called to go and help others who we may not feel they deserve it, let us reach deep inside and see we all were once lost, gone astray, even opposed to God and labeled enemies of God because of our sin and sinful nature.

Let us see with Christ's eyes so that we fight the right fight, not against God but for and with God, fighting well the good fight of faith and of Jesus Christ.

May you be fighting with God and not against as you live out your faith as an individual, as a family member, as a member of your community, of course as a member of Christ's Church, as a member and citizen of our nation, and as a member of the God's creation and humanity.

When we meet Jesus one day, may we have fought the fight well in using love, forgiveness, grace and the very power of God to save, the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than anything else that would otherwise divide as Satan would like to. Let each of us do our part so that no evil

comes out of our mouths, but only blessings and love and fighting words that communicate how we are fighting the only fight we should focus on, so that we may all be unified in fighting the good fight of faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.