

March 8, 2020

Acts 4-5 and 1 Peter 2-3

Let's take a look at a few of our Apostle-shields. First, we have St. Bartholomew - three knives, why? Skinned alive. Then St. James, brother of St. John - a sword, why? Beheaded. Then Peter - an upside-down cross, why? Crucified upside down. Then another James - a saw, why? Tradition tells us he was thrown off the temple, stoned, beaten, and sawed into pieces.

Why? They were tackling touchy topics. Does tackling touchy topics ever have you feeling like you could end up like them? When you're wondering whether to speak up or shut up, do you ever feel like you could be facing that? Or maybe the thought of speaking up has you feeling something different - not the fear that you might lose your life, but the fear that you might lose your comfort, or lose your pride (your standing), or worse - instead of losing your life, you might lose someone else in your life, that someone you love ghost you, that someone in your life might turn on you. Tackling touchy topics can have us feeling afraid and alone.

They (apostles) weren't alone, but they were outnumbered. Most everywhere they went, they were outnumbered. No matter how many joined them, they were still outnumbered. Outnumbered and surrounded by a world of evil, a world of evil that expected them to fit in and get along. What are today's worst evils? Human trafficking, sex trafficking, child neglect, child abuse - that was everyday normal. Everyday normal was - whatever works for you, do it. Whatever feels good for you, do it. Whatever you want for you, do it. In those days, the worst sin was this - Not fitting in. Not going along. And as Christians, they didn't fit in. As followers of Jesus, they weren't following along with the world.

And in many ways it cost them. Facing the touchy topics cost some their lives, cost others their livelihoods. Facing the touchy topics cost some their homes, cost others their families and friends. Facing the touchy topics - some would pay the price. And some wouldn't - they sold their souls to fit in and go along with the world. Does any of that sound familiar? Sounds more and more like our world today - a world filled with NONES. NONES - none of a noticeable connection with Jesus.

Outnumbered, not fitting in, treated like outcasts, treated like fools, counted as losers by the world. Does that sound like a group you'd like to join? And yet the church grew. Why? It wasn't that they gave up the touchy topics. It wasn't that they learned to keep quiet about the touchy topics. It wasn't that they changed their teaching on the touchy topics. So what was it? What did the early church have that had so many people wanting to join the fools and the losers?

Here's the short answer: they had God. They had God and his Word. Paul said: **"I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe."** Outnumbered, not fitting in, treated like losers and fools, they still had God's Word. And God's Word works. Not always like that (snap of the finger). Not always our way. Not always when or where we want. But God's Word works. Otherwise the church would have been wiped out long ago (look at signs of the martyred apostles).

But they had something more than God and God's Word. They had God and God's Word in their hearts and lives - and it showed. They were outnumbered. They didn't fit in. They were treated like fools and losers. But they didn't give in. They didn't give up and go along with the world. They lived like they had God and God's Word in their hearts. They lived differently. And people noticed.

They lived differently. They honored their fathers and mothers. They didn't fight; they didn't bully to get their way. They didn't cheat on their spouses and sleep around; they honored marriage. They didn't steal and rip each other off. They didn't gossip and lie and complain. In a messy, messy world, they lived pure and decent lives. I'm not saying that they never slipped or struggled. But they lived differently than their neighbors. And their neighbors noticed.

And there was something else. They didn't just behave right. They cared for each other, and they cared for people around them. Fighting against sin in a world of sin, it can be easy to be stand-offish, to feel a bit better than the neighbors, to look down on people living in the mess. But they cared for each other, and not just each other, they cared for the people around them.

Outnumbered, not fitting in, treated like outcasts, treated like fools, counted as losers by the world - treated that way it can be easy to put up our defenses, to stay to ourselves, to become prickly and unapproachable. But they cared for each other, and not just each other, they cared for the people around them. And people noticed.

In times of hurt and heartache, they forgave each other and they forgave their enemies. In times of need, they were there for each other, and there for their neighbors. They were kind and generous in the church, and they were kind and generous out in the world. They didn't push their way on people, but they spoke with gentleness and respect. I'm not saying that they never slipped or struggled, but they lived differently than the world. And the world noticed.

The world noticed that there was something different, something special going on in the lives of Christians. They wanted some of that something different, something special. So they asked, and they listened. And they heard about Jesus. The early Christian church shared what we love to hear. In our messy, messy world, we have a God with a better way, a better life. In our dark and dying world, we get to look forward to the light and life of heaven. How? Why? God doesn't just say: "Here's what you need to do; now do it. Here's what you need to do, or else." No, Jesus did so much more. Jesus joined us in the mess of this dark, dying world and he shouldered God's "here's what you need to do" for us. He lived our lives, caring, loving, decent and pure. But that's not all; he died our deaths. On the cross, he shouldered the "or else" that we had coming for crossing God. Yes, Jesus lived the life God demands of us; he died the death we deserve. He got it done for us - "it is finished" - and so God raised him back to live and rule - as Lord and Savior - today and forever.

And us? With Jesus, we get to live right with God. In our messy lives, turning to Jesus, we get to hear: "You're forgiven!" In our broken-ness, we get to hear Jesus: "I've got you covered, safe with me." In our dark and dying world, we get to follow Jesus: "I've got a better life for you, not just here, but forever with me in heaven!" What would your life be like without that?

What does that mean for today's touchy topics? We have a whole new way of seeing God, a new way of hearing Jesus, don't we? Touched with the love of Jesus, today's touchy topics aren't so touchy for us, are they? Do you think that same thing could be true for some of the people around us? That if they were to see more of the Jesus in us (peace, hope, love), that they might be willing to hear more of the Jesus in us? Living the love of Jesus can open doors for us - doors and eyes and ears and hearts and minds. And perhaps by the grace of God, today's touchy topics, and today's touchy people, won't be so touchy, because they have been touched and covered with the love of Jesus. Amen.