

14 February 2016

When Church Gets in the Way

Acts 4:13-20

Our New Testament reading is from the Book of Acts. In chapter 3, Peter and John go to worship in the Jerusalem temple, where they see a lame man begging for money. Having no money, Peter heals the man in the name of Jesus. This causes a stir, and the leaders of the temple bring them in for questioning.

Acts 4:13-20

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another. They said, 'What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.' So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.'

One thing we often miss when we read the stories of the early church in Acts is that nobody started out to create the early church. All the disciples were Jews. They had been raised in that faith, nurtured in its synagogues, taught to respect its temple. They had never considered leaving their faith, and Jesus had never told them to. Quite the opposite, in fact: Jesus had taught entirely within the context of the Jewish faith, appealing to the Jewish scriptures. Sure, Jesus and his followers had had some differences with the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus had criticized some of the temple practices and had challenged some of the priests' priorities, which had culminated in those priests handing Jesus over to be crucified – but even after that, Jesus' followers remained faithful Jews. Our story today begins with Peter and John, the leaders of Jesus' disciples, going to the temple to pray. They were *not* planning to give up the faith that had brought them this far. Instead, they evidently hoped to reform their faith from within.

But the Jewish leaders would have none of it. After Peter and John had healed the lame man and proclaimed publically that they did so in the name of Jesus, the priests and scribes had them brought in. They scolded and threatened them and finally told them that they could go if they'd promise to stop talking about Jesus. To which Peter and John replied, "Sorry, but we can't do that."

This is one of the last times in the Bible when we see any of Jesus' followers participating in the established Jewish religion. From here on, we hear about them meeting separately, in homes. It's true that Paul, on his missionary journeys, always started out in the Jewish synagogue, but on the rare occasions when people actually listened to him, they then went off and started a house church separate from the synagogue. By the end of Acts,

Christianity was effectively a different faith. Jews who wished to follow Jesus, had to leave the community of faith they had grown up in.

Why do you suppose the Jewish leaders were so intent on driving the early Christians away? Wouldn't you *want* to keep such renewed, excited, energetic, creative believers, in the fold? Some, like the Rabbi Gamaliel, seemed to think so. But in the end, they kicked the Christians out of the synagogue, then used threats and terror to try to stamp them out entirely. Why did they feel they had to do that? Well, here's my guess. First, these new Jesus-followers were a threat to the Jewish leaders' authority. You see, the priests and scribes were important in that society, and had earned their position through years of study under the rabbis. But the Jesus people were, as we heard in our reading, *uneducated and ordinary*. You can't let just anyone be a leader; if you do, it lowers the value of a good seminary education. But there was more than that. The new teaching was a threat the established faith itself. Jesus had questioned firmly entrenched priorities (like the Sabbath) and criticized established practices (like the money tables in the temple) and broken important social barriers (by healing Gentiles and talking to Samaritans and including women in his inner circle). There was no way to keep the Jesus people inside Judaism, at least as it was practiced then, without changing it. Ultimately, to keep doing things the way they had always done them, they had to get rid of the Christians.

This isn't the only time followers of Jesus have had to leave their church, of course. Martin Luther never wanted to leave the Catholic church; he wanted to reform it. But the church didn't want to be reformed by him, and in the end, he had to leave. The same is true of John Wesley, who remained an Anglican his whole life and never wanted his Methodists to become a separate church. But we did. And it's happening today. Some of you may remember that last October I went to a conference in Colorado. I went to hear sociologist Josh Packard speak about a study he has just completed, on people leaving the American church. Now we hear a lot about this – especially the departure of young adults – but that's not exactly what Dr. Packard studied. He had a very precise focus. He wasn't interested in young people who wander away from their parents' faith or, for that matter, people who leave one church to join another. He didn't study people who left church because they got offended. Nor did he look at people who were never very involved and who disappeared completely after their kids got confirmed. He wasn't even interested in people who had a crisis of faith and decided they didn't believe anymore. All of these are old, familiar patterns, but none are what he examined. Instead, Dr. Packard studied people who have been very involved in church, have held leadership positions, have done what they could to support it, but who eventually reached a point where they felt they had no choice but to leave – and so they left church entirely. His study is called "Church Refugees," and he refers to the people he studied as the "Dones."

Dr. Packard had discovered was a small but growing group of people who had left church because they felt that the institution was no longer helping their faith but actually hindering it. Did you hear that? The "Dones" have not left their faith; they left the church in order to live their faith more fully. They didn't leave in anger, but generally with great sadness. Most of them struggled with the decision for years, but they were growing and changing in their own faith in ways that their church did not encourage and in some cases actively discouraged. In the end, these church refugees – like the early Christians, early Lutherans, and early Methodists – concluded that they had to choose between staying in church and following Christ. So they left.

Some of you are puzzled by this, but some of you are nodding. Some of you recognize the struggle. At the conference, at one point, a man near me stood up and said, “My name is So-and-So, and I’m the pastor of Such-and-Such a church. And if it weren’t my livelihood, I would be a Done.” A woman said, “I’m not a Done, but I’m only staying to try to protect new Christians from the church.” Since writing his book, Packard has continued his research, and he says that it suggests that there is a second, much larger, wave of people poised to leave.

But here’s the good news. Packard’s book is not another one of those hand-wringing “what-are-we-going-to-do?” studies that dissect the church like a cadaver. It’s a thoughtful and ultimately hopeful study of what actually matters in the church, some of which we have evidently forgotten. He doesn’t pretend that he has the answer; he offers no three easy steps for fixing your church. But what he offers instead is a rediscovered vision of what a church can be. Over the next four weeks, I’m going to be unpacking some of the specifics of that vision, the things that these active, growing Christians were looking for in their church but not finding, things that they ultimately had to look for elsewhere. In a sense, I’m going to be laying out some Lenten disciplines for the church, some ways we could re-imagine ourselves, because it matters. All across our land, people who love the church are leaving her, just as the early Christians did in Acts.

Which leads to the question we’ll be asking this season. The leaders of the Jerusalem temple didn’t think it was worth their effort to make the changes that might have kept the followers of Jesus. Will we?